

PROPHETIC PREACHING AND METHODIST SOCIAL THEOLOGY  
AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE  
SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PROPHETIC PREACHING AND METHODIST SOCIAL THEOLOGY AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY**

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The focus of this project is to use prophetic preaching and traditional Methodist social theology as impetus for the development of a social justice ministry in the context of the St. John's C.M.E. Church in Detroit, Michigan. The methodology was the homiletical use of fundamental Methodist doctrine, surveys, interviews, and participant responses to measure congregational interest. Participants responded favorably to the methods and have begun the process of justice ministry development using the given theology. The researcher concludes that when intentional and deliberate methods are employed for the purpose of ministry development, historic church contexts are amenable to ministry development.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Jacquelyn Gordon, for her devotion and love  
and my grandmother, Emma Bell, for allowing me to believe the impossible.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Problem Statement**

The researcher, Rev. Joseph B. Gordon, recognizes that ministry is both a calling and a responsibility. As such, it is necessary to ensure that wherever one is placed in ministry, he or she is fulfilling given responsibilities. Part of these responsibilities means understanding that ministry does not occur in a vacuum. Ministry occurs in a particular place at a particular time. Thus, each ministry has a context. The context in which the researcher has been placed is the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit, Michigan. Detroit, over the past few decades, has experienced a great population loss, as well as many financial difficulties, which makes governing and, sometimes even living, difficult, but gives great opportunities for doing ministry.

The immediate context surrounding the St. John's Church was once thriving and influential. It has now turned into dilapidated housing and depressed communities. Within the confines of these neighborhoods are many persons living without hope. Many residents find themselves surrounded by drug houses, abandoned homes, high crime, and a culture of fear. Even worse, residents live without an advocate on their side. St. John's role, in past years, was to stand in solidarity with such persons, aiding them with emergency food and basic needs. For the past few decades, however, the church has seemingly abandoned that mission, much to the detriment of the community.

Due, in large part, to the researcher's own history and personal journey of once needing aid, as well as the prophetic burden he feels in his own life to be an advocate for the marginalized, a desire to reignite the missional fire of the St. John's congregation was birthed. The researcher's theology is that the church is called to be a consistent and vigorous advocate for justice, peace, and the reverence of all life. Each member should understand and recognize that action on behalf of justice is a significant criterion of the church's fidelity to its missions. The researcher suggests that such social justice is not optional, nor is it the work of only a few in the church. Social justice is ministry to which all are called according to their vocation, talents, and life situations. It is out of this conviction that this ministry research project was birthed.

The researcher has sought to wed the art of prophetic preaching and the strengths of Wesley's social theology for the purpose of social justice ministry development. The researcher begins in chapter one with the focus on his spiritual journey and formative development. Also, in chapter one, the researcher examines the context of the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the city of Detroit, Michigan. In chapter two, the researcher reviews literature pertaining to prophetic preaching, Wesleyan and Methodist social theology. The researcher then, in chapter three, offers theological foundations related to Wesleyan polity and praxis. The researcher then provides readers with justice discussed from a biblical standpoint, using Luke 11:37-44 and Micah 6:8 as the anchors for this critical foundational segment. A historical Wesleyan perspective on the issues of justice and community advocacy closes out chapter three. In chapter four, the researcher shares with readers how he developed the ministry project or model for preaching Wesleyan-infused prophetic sermons to the St. John's congregation. In chapter



five, he examines the implementation of the ministry model and analyzes the results of preaching prophetic sermons to the St. John's Church. Finally, in chapter six, the researcher concludes this project and provides recommendations for further implementation of prophetic sermons and ministry in the Wesleyan tradition.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Ministry Focus**

The researcher of this project believes that a pastor/preacher cannot be effective in his or her area of ministry without passion and purpose. The researcher further believes that one's purpose is birthed out of his or her experiences, both good and bad. He believes that his journey from Detroit, through Chicago, and back home to Detroit is not the design of human intention, but God's divine will. Upon his assignment to the historic St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Detroit, Michigan, the researcher noticed great opportunity for ministry in a context with much potential that, in reality, lost its way.

The theology of the researcher, as informed by biblical writ, contends that justice is not simply the heart of the biblical message but it should be a way of life and an imperative embraced by the Christian community that demands a response in the wake of the suffering of the world. Such suffering continues to alert the human community of the urgent need for a new ethical praxis, one that will deal with the social injustices being endured by the whole of humanity. This is a challenging task, to say the least, but the difficulty of the task is vastly outweighed by the immense injustice which occurs in communities both great and small on a daily basis.

The researcher felt a divine unction that compelled him to believe that for this ministry to become truly great, it must find what was lost: a prophetic burden to be a beacon of light to the now blighted neighborhood in Detroit's North-end. Just as Mordecai spoke the word to Esther in the Old Testament, "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such time as this."<sup>1</sup> The researcher believes that he came home to the city of Detroit at the appointed time, to bring to light the mission and purpose of the ministry of St. John's C.M.E. Church. This purpose is to develop social justice ministry in both precept and activity. In order to do this, the congregation must answer the question: what are we here to do? Those who are burdened and blessed with the ministry of Jesus Christ will answer the question in the same manner as Christ, when quoting the prophet Isaiah, "to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>2</sup> This is social justice, the ministry the St. John's Church is called to do.

### *Spiritual Autobiography*

How does one write about the formative personal and spiritual experiences that have brought them to the present? Surely, it is through much prayer and recollection of those events that have shaped the researcher's life as a Christian and a pastor. This is the researcher's goal as he prayerfully pens the following narrative as he reflects on those experiences that have proved both beneficial and seminal in this the researcher's spiritual journey of faith. This practice of penning a spiritual autobiography, looking over those

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<sup>1</sup> Esther 4:14b NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

seminal events in the researcher's life has been both arduous and fulfilling in its own way. Arduous in the sense that, in ministry, after a certain level of maturation, there is sometimes a tendency toward self-deception and hypocrisy. Some things are concealed, while others are highlighted for a particular benefit. Such vices were brought to the light in this exercise. Fulfilling, however, because it allows for confrontation of life's issues, both spiritual and otherwise, that have shaped and develop the researcher's true self. The researcher's story is not really one of a great dramatic conversion or the like. It is simply a recounting of the wonderful life God has allowed him to live up to this point. For everyone's story has great worth, and the author's is no different. In fact, as he has searched and wrestled with both God and self, the researcher has come to recognize his story as truly one of overcoming, a testimony.

Growing up on the economically deprived west side of Detroit, Michigan, the youngest of four children, three of which were male, to a single mother, Jacquelyn Gordon, the researcher learned at an early age of the concept of struggle. It's amazing, however, that while in the midst of struggle; rarely did he have an awareness of his family's poverty. Perhaps this was due to the fact that everyone in that community was on an equal playing field from a socio-economic standpoint. The researcher's mother worked diligently to provide for the family. In fact, there was not a Christmas where the family did not have at least something under the tree to unwrap and for which to be thankful. However, as he got older, he learned that it was not an easy task for his mother to provide those gifts and even the basic necessities. In fact, food and everyday provisions were present, but, by no means guaranteed on a regular basis. One of his greater life lessons was learned during this season of childhood development in that life is

not always simple, nor should it be, but the priorities of God and family take precedence over anything else. There was never a case that he can remember where the importance of spirituality and family love was not lifted up as a precept by which to live. So even with modest means, he was taught by his mother that “God will make a way,” and God did.

Perhaps the researcher’s greatest spiritual inspiration was his grandmother. She had always been a hard worker, and although her sons had not turned out what she hoped, taught, and prayed them to be, the researcher’s father included, she maintained her faith. In fact, she was the primary exemplar of the faith in the researcher’s life. There was a consistency about her life, which is admired to this day. She nurtured his inner being, allowed him to dream, and challenged his preconceived notions about the world. She taught him to be both tolerant and honest. Each weekend, he would leave the drug infested, violent streets of Linwood and Dexter, for the more serene environment of his grandmother’s neighborhood. At grandma’s house, there was one absolute: Grace Christian Methodist Episcopal Church on Sunday morning. Not only that, the researcher and his grandmother would travel to malls, nice restaurants, cultural events. It was with his grandmother that he experienced things most children in his grade and community did not. He was exposed to different cultures and regions. He learned how to associate with persons of other races and income levels. But even with all of that, God was forming him. On Sunday mornings, there would be Sunday school, morning worship, and the occasional afternoon program. Many children Joseph’s age loathed such a long day of church, but there was something innate within him that allowed it to be such a joy, such a pleasure. Joseph revered the preacher and had no idea what a bad sermon was, at the time. He enjoyed the fellowship and seeing his friends from week to week. But after a

while, it all began to be the same. As he got older, what Joseph learned was that there was a spiritual longing that was absent. Certainly spirituality is experiential. The Christianity the researcher's youth did not offer Joseph spirituality, however. It offered me texts, traditions, rituals, and community. It offered him a sense of belonging, something that he did, in fact need. Yet it did not provide me with an adequate framework of meaning for the experiences he began to have during the formative years. It also did not adequately prepare Joseph for the great season of change that was awaiting him.

Nothing in this physical realm of time and space is constant. Joseph would learn this lesson between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. The researcher's grandparents moved to Florida when he was thirteen years old. This was a great heartbreak for him. No more weekend trips. No longer would he receive the exposure to that which was so unique, so antithetical to his humble surroundings. Joseph's grandmother, Emma, told him, as she and his grandfather were leaving, "We're always with you." Joseph unfortunately did not feel that at the time. But an amazing thing did happen. Members of the church picked up where the his grandmother left off, ensuring that he made it to church on Sundays and other church functions. He didn't miss a beat going to the place that he loved and was loved. It was this community that Joseph would need on an even greater level just two years later. Joseph's family finally moved to a nicer neighborhood and was doing fine financially when Joseph's mother began to go in and out of the hospital. The family would later learn that she had congestive heart failure. She maintained her strength for so long, though she knew that many people did not live long lives with this sickness. On Super Bowl night in 1998, Joseph was leaving to go over his girlfriend's house on the

bus, though he was supposed to be picked up by her family. Joseph's mother cautioned him, "Jo-Jo, don't let people do whatever they want to you." That was the last thing she ever spoke to him. As he came back home that night she was asleep on the couch. The next morning she was in that same place, as she often was. Joseph got a call during school that she had indeed passed away, most likely during the night. This experience would prove to be the greatest period of formation and struggle in his life. Is God still good after momma dies? He wrestled with that question for some time, finally surrendering to God's will. Nevertheless, Joseph was profoundly changed, spiritually and as a man, from that moment on.

Following the researcher's mother's passing, the researcher's family and I began to move on a regular basis. Joseph lived with a variety of persons including aunts, cousins, and grandparents. Joseph finally settled with a very close family from the church, the Burroughs, until beginning college. There were two important lessons that he attained during this time of movement and change: (1) People will extend themselves to be of assistance in times of great need, and (2) the only constants in this world are God's love and provision. In fact, it was Joseph's faith that kept him during those times of uncertainty and fear. He learned how to search the scriptures during this season and began to discover a remarkable thing, the promises of God are always true and until you live them for yourself your testimony is invalid. It was also around this time that he learned what true spirituality was all about. Church membership is a good thing, but Joseph made a great move during a season of trial and fear, to discipleship. Later in life he would find that Charles Spurgeon was correct when he said, "The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction."

Joseph accepted the call to preach just a few months before his mother died, at age fifteen. This acceptance was preceded by a series of dreams of him being placed in a valley and a new set of lenses with which he was able to see life differently. He was different than his peers, as the researcher's heart and mind would usually be fixed on uncommon things for a boy his age. Joseph didn't share the same interest in the more elementary things, the things that gave pleasure to his counterparts. There was nothing religious about this phenomenon, initially, until at last he heard a sermon preached by his former pastor entitled, "Reaching Out to the Valley." It was then that he felt a divine compulsion to serve God and man through the vocation of ministry. Joseph couldn't articulate it then, but he was called, he truly felt, to reach out to those in the valley after experiencing such a mountaintop moment. For him, the blessed benefit of the mountaintop experience is the transformation of the valley, that is, the community. Christianity at its core is to be made useful for the world. Joseph began to understand that all of the life lessons taught to him by his grandmother, mother and trusted friends were useful as it related to his faith. There were some basic things: tolerance, forgiveness, empathy, that translated well when it came to the things of the faith. How can one minister effectively to those who are in need of forgiveness or simply love, if forgiveness and love are not appreciated and well understood by the preacher? He found that there was a time of preparation in his life prior to the calling that would give foundational learning's to better prepare him for his future roles.

Ministry for Joseph, early on, was a period of watching and waiting. Watching because he wanted to be a diligent student of the church and of ministry itself. Waiting because he wanted to ensure that he was being patient for the opportunities that might



come the researcher's way, so as to not be too eager to move forward without the proper preparation. It was during this season of watching and waiting that he preached his first sermon but also learned a great lesson about ministry. Ministry is first and foremost relational. Joseph remembered hearing a minister teaching regarding relationships that, "the more intimate we become the more complex we become." As such, people have depths of value that become apparent only when we take the opportunity to get to know them, work alongside them, and listen to them. In fact, as one searches the pages of scripture, it is virtually impossible to do the things that Christ taught without others. All that Christ instructed us to do is carried out in the context of community. This is a precept that has guided both his early ministry as well as his contemporary practices.

Joseph grew during his college years at the University of Michigan both intellectually and spiritually. He learned that faith and reason are compatible. In fact, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral sources of scripture, tradition, reason and experience have proved extremely useful as he approaches the faith. One should never be so one dimensional in their approach to faith and ministry, as there are a number of sources that inform and shape our understanding of God and the world. Joseph was uncertain as to what his next steps would be following college. He certainly knew that he was called to minister, but didn't feel the unction to pastor. The final year of the researcher's college experience was a great time of discovery for me. He had worked with and for Congressman John Conyers on community issues, including housing, economic develop and access to health care. He learned of the great disparities in most urban communities versus their suburban counterparts. This strengthened his desire to work with the underserved and the underprivileged and he had decided, initially, to go into government, as a community

liaison. But there was something that was still not adding up. Joseph didn't feel completely comfortable with that decision. After a discussion with his Presiding Elder, his pastor, and following much prayer and personal deliberation, he made the decision to attend seminary. Joseph felt a deeper need to serve in a more holistic fashion, both physical needs as well as the soul. He had already accepted the call to preach, but now he was accepting his role as a pastor of God's people. The calling that he was living into necessitated that he take that next step. He wanted to have a core theological foundation that he might better position himself for practical ministry.

Attending Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary was one of the most rewarding experiences of the Joseph's life. In hindsight, it really wasn't a tough decision at all. In ministry, Joseph has always wanted to give the best to God's people. In order to give the best, you must be trained in both head and heart. The calling is one thing, but that calling must be nurtured, tested, and tried in the fields of preparation. How else is that calling developed? One essential truth that he attained in seminary is that the God who provided during those unfavorable and sometimes frightening seasons in doubt, fear and uncertainty is the same God that has now become more complex and approachable. A superficial understanding of God is one that does not wrestle with the questions of faith and spirituality. The Lord is unchanging, but there is more to know and understand about God. In seminary, Joseph gained the proper skills to develop and strengthen the skills of theorizing, but also how to properly apply that knowledge to doing practical ministry. He also nurtured his first love of preaching. Joseph's primary and fundamental reason for wanting to attend United Theological Seminary was to further develop, expand and grow his homiletical skills. How can he better deliver the changeless and timeless truth of God

in more effective and imaginative ways? What biases, prejudices and convictions did he hold that served as either impediments or aids to the preaching moment? Furthermore, how does he better promote justice and love in the sermon, and what place does the joining of intellect and faith have in homiletical exercise? By confronting these and other questions and challenges, he has learned that his preaching and homiletical imagination is informed by all that has been deposited in his own spirit by his family, church and life.

Joseph has now been pastor of four churches. He has pastored in both small towns as well as the major melting pots of Chicago and Detroit. The one challenge that he has encountered in each location has been answering the “so what” question. In short, answering the so what question means regardless of how successful church programming is, are we truly meeting the needs of the community and being intentional about the ministries we practice or provide? This is not a welcome question for many members, but Joseph has found it to be quite necessary if there is to be growth that takes place in the life of the congregation. To assist in this effort, he has being deliberate about maintaining personal study and nurture in the past few years. This has taken some practice. Over the past year, he has re-read and taught recently on Donald Kraybill’s seminal text, *The Upside Down Kingdom*. He continues to be amazed at how Jesus’ principles continue to challenge our normal assumptions. The very persons that the world objects and disenfranchises are the very ones that the Lord calls us to serve. We value what the world does not. He has also found a great resource in *Our Sufficiency Is of God: Essays on Preaching in Honor of Gardner C. Taylor*, edited by Timothy George and *Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, edited by Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas. He enjoys the historical perspective and fresh

insight toward homiletic expression in these and other texts. Joseph is a student of preaching, first and foremost, and in the process of finding his own voice, especially as a prophetic preacher, he has been informed by various models of preaching. He seeks to be a forever student, always willing to learn and to be open to whatever God may bring his way as a learning opportunity.

As a result of the researcher's mother's passing, Joseph has generally been able to deal with crises reasonably well. However, in the summer of 2010, his ability to rebound naturally from traumatic events was tested as never before. A very faithful member, referred to here as "Roscer," informed me late in 2009 that he was suffering with ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. His unfamiliarity with the disease didn't trigger any major health alarms, however. It was later discovered, through research and discussion with his wife and others, that ALS was a terminal neurological disorder which ultimately results in paralysis and later, death. There had been times in the Joseph's life when there were certain pieces of information that he simply wished he did not know, this was indeed one of them. The time spent month after month, week after week observing Roscer getting thinner, weaker, and less able to communicate for himself was the single most difficult pastoral care exercise that he had ever had to endure. This was not simply because the disease was destroying his body, but because he still had to attempt to effectively minister to the family, especially the wife. As such, the emotional effects of having to provide comfort to a man who was fully aware that he was dying, as well as to a wife who, at times, was in denial but still hoping for a miracle was exhausting. The time came when Joseph had to ask and answer the questions: "Wasn't it you who preached all those sermons on God being able to turn it around? Where is your

faith?” There came a point in the his life where he began to understanding that no matter how hard the minister may try, he cannot divorce himself fully from the circumstances of his or her members, especially during moments of death. In fact, there were times when all I could do after visiting the man who he had grown to love and work with in ministry was sit in the car and cry. Roscer even asked the question, “What did I do that was so bad to deserve this?” The response, however was simple, and introduced a key learning. Oftentimes, the tragedies of life just simply happen, without warning, without a cause related to any particular thing that one has done, God’s will just happens. When they happen, they are indeed faith-testing moments, but those who are faithful resign themselves to the theology presented in Daniel by the three Hebrew boys which says that even if God does not deliver, that does not mean that God is unable to deliver.

Another critical learning for Joseph in this moment was that as a minister, sometimes all you can do is provide the ministry of presence. Being present makes all the difference in the world, especially when that presence is accompanied by listening, shared weeping, and also giving the family permission, in a sense, to be themselves in terms of anger, frustration, and other emotional means. Certainly this is what Jesus modeled for us, even as he heard of Lazarus’ death, his first means to care for Lazarus’ family was to go be with them. He went to them. He wept with them. He comforted them. In the summer of 2010, Roscer died peacefully in his sleep. This was the end of his earthly sojourn, but just the beginning of more opportunities for Joseph to share with his family and to provide them further comfort, using the Jesus model of simply being present and willing to help wherever necessary. This is a model that has been useful in numerous cases of seeming tragedy.

This encounter with Roscer and his family, along with other great and trying moments, affected Joseph profoundly and truly affected how he even observes God as a whole. As we go through suffering and other painful predicaments, God does not stand idly by, simply watching our circumstance. God is not some remote or detached deity, looking low on creation. In fact, God is familiar with suffering. Even as God watched God's only Son, Jesus Christ, suffer for the purpose of redeeming humanity. As such, all suffering has some purpose, some greater goal behind it. This was not an easy place to get to, but Joseph has endeavored to never allow suffering to be wasted on him or those under his care. He has unequivocally decided to not be resigned to the theology that says woe is me. Instead, he makes the choice to rest in God's will, even though the cause or the outcome sometimes remains unknown.

Joseph has heard numerous ministers of the gospel refer to the burden of preaching. Indeed, I have found this to be true. This preaching vocation has been for him burdensome due, in part, to the unending tendency to find oneself lost in church and denominational religiosity. That is, those behaviors and rituals of the faith that usually have nothing to do with the overall mission of the church, let alone the teachings and mandates of Christ. Such behaviors are tempting, carefree and have all too often been commonplace in the researcher's ministry contexts. As such, when the community's interests are emphasized, there has always been a trying resistance, which is almost always the case in traditional mainline denominational contexts that do not have a history of outreach or community service. This is the challenge and the opportunity, the burden and the blessing.

Preaching is not only burdensome, at times, but the life of a pastor is also one that lends itself toward loneliness. Since being a pastor is a lonely or isolated vocation, there have been a number of challenges that Joseph has faced as a result of this truth. He has found the need to remain guarded in many instances. In such a public position, there have many been times that he has not been as candid or transparent as he would have liked when in the company of members or, in some cases, other clergy persons. While not being secret, there are certain things, however pressing or genuine, that Joseph has chosen to keep private, as persons have a tendency to misunderstand or add to the intimate details of person's lives, especially preachers. There are some issues, including struggles and domestic challenges that should not be shared with members. As true as this is, it has created the need in his life for transparency and openness. So often times as a young, single pastor, Joseph has felt the need to spill his proverbial guts out, only to find that, aside from family, there are not many outlets in which to turn. Even Christ had close friends, but had to oftentimes escape to be alone, as he was so misunderstood and taken for granted as he sought to minister effectively to those within and those without. The loneliness of the ministry is not something that this preacher is comfortable getting used to, but is learning to cope with it, while also identifying those persons, including colleagues and others who can be sources of confidence.

The researcher's current ministry context is the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Detroit, MI. This historic church was organized in 1917 as the first Christian Methodist congregation in the state. It was also the first black congregation on Woodward Avenue, a very prominent road which separates east from west and the city from suburbs. Learning this history and the role the church once played in the community

was eye-opening for me as he now pastors the congregation after a few decades of major decline. One of the Joseph's ethics professors at Garrett, Brent Waters, once said that one of the unfortunate goals of seminary is to teach persons how to pastor dying churches. However, the dilemma for him was not raising the question of how to pastor a dying congregation in a declining denomination, with little resources. The question that this researcher raised was what needs to be done in order to turn this church into what the community needs it to be. This alludes to the earlier mandate on the Joseph's life in terms of the transformation of the valley. It is not enough to get replenished, revitalized and restored in the comfortable, non-threatening confines of church worship. The researcher's mandate, our mandate must be in the transformation of our individual contexts of ministry. I have discovered that sometimes the "Mother Church" mentality can become a serious impediment to doing real ministry. This is especially true when the church has a history of persons joining simply because of the Great Migration and name recognition whereas now there are thousands of alternatives in the city of Detroit alone. The researcher's responsibility in this context then, as he understands it, is to reclaim and rewrite the church's vision and mission.

St. John's is in a blighted, once prosperous area of Detroit's west side. Families dwelling in this neighborhood have been greatly affected by the economic downturns of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Family incomes have gone down, while the high school dropout rate has increased. Many persons in this area receive public assistance of some type, but even public aid is no longer available to some. With so much going wrong in this community, the church need not feel helpless, as we possess the prophetic word which must lead to intentional ministry. St. John's is not unfamiliar with the need to



assist and being a source of aid to those who have lost hope. During the Great Depression and the Detroit riots, it was St. John's who opened its doors to families who needed assistance and shelter. The church through the years, however, seems to have lost its way. The church that was once the premier location for so many local and regional events now has seemingly shut itself from the very persons who need it most. This said reality has been to its own detriment.

This author is convinced that all Christ taught us to do was in the context of community. It is not acceptable to simply live in a state of institutional maintenance while the community around you is lost and dying. There must be a great commitment first to those in the immediate environs of the church. One need not go far to discover that there is hurt, pain, injustice and communal malaise on the streets that envelop St. John's. The membership, in the researcher's opinion, needs to be taught how to care and how to turn that care into action. Persons must be taught how to step back and open their eyes to what is going on around them. Unless the church truly embraces her prophetic voice, the church ceases to be the church it is called to be. The need for intentional ministry for the St. John's Church will also not come until the people are disturbed by what they see. Many are not disturbed because they do not live in the area and therefore have on the proverbial blinders. It cannot be satisfied with simply having good programs. Men and Women's days, church anniversaries and grand teas do not meet the needs of people, nor do they place an emphasis on the fundamental question: "what are we here for?" The church must also ask the sobering question, "Are we known, at all?" There is a need, finally, to begin asking the "so what" questions as it relates to the larger and overall mission of the church and its relationship to the community. Are we remembering

those who have no voice? And so the church is not engaged, partly, because it is not disturbed. The researcher, thus, sees his responsibility in this context as one who is to reclaim and rewrite the church's vision and mission.

Joseph is now at a place in his life where the constants of God and faith are ever present. He is more honest with self and seeks not to foolishly attempt to disregard the limits of humanity in the hopes of becoming super preacher, for it is in the sharing in the good and the bad, joys and tears, that this pastor has truly learned, and still learn, to shepherd God's people. Joseph still wrestles with feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt and even loneliness. However, his mind always goes back to the reality that kept him grounded and stable during those times of great tribulation and uncertainty, God does not change and always provides. This is a truth, a private yet public ethos of sorts that Joseph holds on to and also dispenses to those who need to be reminded or told for the very first time. It is this truth that gives him peace and allows him to freely be who God created him to be, and to be thankful for the scars, for his scars tell a story of overcoming. This reality of overcoming has shaped the researcher's purpose of reaching out to those who have also experienced hurt and isolation, and to remind them that there is a better way.

### *Context Analysis*

During and after World War I, many southern rural African Americans emigrated to industrial cities in the north. In Detroit, this migration included a number of members of the, then Colored, now Christian, Methodist Episcopal Church, a denomination which had no congregation in the city. For that reason, many such persons joined other denominations upon their arrival.

The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was established as the result of an amicable separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the south in the late 1860s. In December of 1870, forty-one former slaves gathered in Jackson, Tennessee with the advice and support of white brethren of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The aim was to build an independent Methodist denomination that was controlled and operated by blacks alone, unique to those which had already been formed. On December 21, these men concluded their conference, electing William H. Miles and Richard Vanderhorst, of Kentucky and Georgia, respectively, as their bishops. They also received land and properties from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The growth of what had become the “Colored (later Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church” was great. Many C.M.E. churches were established throughout the South, but there came a need to institute congregations in the northern and Midwestern states, as the denomination was losing good members as persons who matriculated to these areas found no C.M.E. church to welcome them. The Southeast Conference of Missouri and Illinois sent Rev. O. L. Mitchell to assemble former C.M.E. members and establish congregations in the Detroit area. He thus organized a mission house church in 1917 and named it St. John, after the apostle. St. John’s C.M.E. Church was thus established as the first of its denomination in Detroit, and located in a brick church at the northwest corner of Dubois and Catherine Streets; this had been built in 1883 for the First German Evangelical Association Church. The new church was received into the C.M.E. Church Annual Conference, and in the fall of 1917, the Reverend O.L. Mitchell was appointed pastor and Presiding Elder of the Detroit area.

In 1918, Rev. J.M. Rivers was appointed pastor, but fell ill. Because of this, the Rev. W.M. Crain was transferred to Detroit and took over the duties both at St. John's and as Presiding Elder. Rev. Crain had a reputation for his preaching and attracted many new members to the congregation. As such, the church found its building too small after only little more than a year.

On November 18, 1919, St. John's purchased St. Mark's English Evangelical Lutheran Church at the northwest corner of St. Aubin and Maple. The Annual Conference as well as other C.M.E. congregations assisted with the purchase. This building, a classical style wooden structure, had been built under a permit issued on November 3, 1899 to Norval Wardrop, a Detroit architect listed in the 1900 City Directory as working for Gordon W. Lloyd. The building was a one-story classical style structure with a columned portico and dome centered on the hip roof. St. Mark's held their last service in the structure on October 15, 1919, and moved their services temporarily to the Rialto Theater.

In 1920, Rev. Crain led St. John's in procession three blocks from their first church to their newly purchased second home. There the congregation remained for over thirty-five years. Their first building became home to another notable black congregation, St. John's Presbyterian, and was eventually demolished as part of the Elmwood Park redevelopment. The young church experienced several short pastorates, but in 1921, the Rev. A. W. Womack became the first long-term pastor, remaining until 1928. The 1920's were a period of growth for the congregation; the depression years that followed were difficult. St. John's served as an important resource for its community in those hard times, becoming a distribution center for government surplus food.

The World War II years brought economic prosperity, and the mortgage on the church buildings was retired in 1944, and improvements made to the church property. The congregation continued to grow, and in 1945, rev. Walter H. Amos became pastor and Rev. Emmanuel M. Dozier became Presiding Elder. This leadership team served for a lengthy term, into the 1960's, and led the congregation in unprecedented growth and prosperity. Rev. Amos' pastorate reached its peak in 1955, when he led the congregation to its new home at Woodward and Blaine Avenues. St. John's purchased the former North Woodward Congregational Church on the main thoroughfare of Woodward Avenue, becoming the first black congregation to have a church located in the affluent section of Detroit known as "Piety Hill." This new location provided seating for 2,500 persons, as the membership swelled to nearly 2,000 regular parishioners in the late 1950s. In 1962, the C.M.E. Church recognized the outstanding quality of Rev. Amos' leadership, and he was elected a Bishop of the church.

Since its inception, the church has had twelve pastors, with an average tenure of five years, with the longest being seventeen years and the shortest being one year. The current building has been occupied for fifty-seven years and includes a gymnasium with basketball court, a bowling alley, men and women's parlors, a chapel which seats 250, as well as a series of stained glass windows in the main sanctuary once valued at over \$2 million. The church is primarily African American, although a few persons of European descent have joined in recent years.

### *History of the Buildings*

The church complex now occupied by St. John's C.M.E. Church was originally begun in 1907 for the newly formed North Congregational Church. The First

Congregational Church had purchased the property at Woodward and Blaine in 1902, like with the establishment of a daughter congregation in mind. On August 16, 1907, the Detroit architects Malcomson and Higginbotham took out a building permit for a brick veneer church structure 42 feet by 65 feet, to be built at a cost of five-thousand dollars. The resulting structure contained a meeting space as well as offices and other facilities, and was built of brown glazed brick in the Arts and Crafts manner of the period.

At Easter, 1908, North Congregational Church merged with Woodward Avenue Congregational Church. Both congregations were offshoots of First Congregational Church, North Woodward being newly formed and Woodward Ave. Congregational Church having been established in 1866. After the merger of the Woodward Avenue and North Congregational churches, plans to build a sanctuary at the Woodward and Blaine location moved forward and on October 30, 1909, the cornerstone was laid. The new church was designed by architect Hugh Barrett Clement, a member of the church. Building permit 2318 had been issued on September 22, 1909 for a two story brick and stone church 83 feet by 153 feet by 72 feet high, with a slate roof. Gearing Brothers Ltd. was the contractor, and the estimated cost was seventy-eight thousand dollars. The new church was dedicated on February 5, 1911.

The Woodward Avenue Congregational Church property at Woodward and Sibley was sold in 1909 and the combined congregations used the chapel unit at Woodward and Blaine until the new church was ready. The old Second Congregational Church was demolished and replaced by the Colonial Theater.

In 1921, North Woodward Avenue Church bought the terrace of nine row houses located at the southwest corner and Woodward and Gladstone. These had been built

under a permit issued October 17, 1904 at an estimated cost of \$20,000 and had two units facing Woodward and seven facing Gladstone. This purchase gave the church ownership of the entire block face of Woodward between Blaine and Gladstone. The terraces were transferred with the church to St. John's C.M.E. in 1955 and remain in church ownership today through the church's Edmunds-Carr Housing Development Corporation.

During the booming 1920's, the neighborhood grew and completed its development, and the recreational and educational facilities of North Woodward Avenue Congregational Church demanded expansion. On March 20, 1929, permit number 56200 was issued to architect A.R. Morrison for the building now seen to the north of the sanctuary; this stands in front of the 1907 chapel and completely screens it. The only 1907 portion of the complex now visible is the alley side of the chapel building, constructed of common brick.

The Great Depression began the process of neighborhood change in the North Woodward area, and the housing shortages and influx of workers during World War II continued to it. By the early 1950's, the North Woodward church was serving many who lived at some distance from the church, and a decision was made to relocate. Property was purchased along James Couzens Highway in Southfield, and a new church complex was begun. The last Congregational services were held in the Woodward Avenue church in May, 1955 and the congregation moved to its new home under the name of North Congregational Church. Anticipating the move, N. Woodward Avenue sold its property under a land contract dated June 5, 1953, to St. John's C.M.E. Church. This land contract was closed out by the issuance of a Warranty Deed on May 1, 1964. Not only did this sale anticipate the actual move of the Congregational church by about two years, but it

also likely reflected planning by St. John's C.M.E. to replace their St. Aubin property, located within the Elmwood Park redevelopment area. After St. John's moved to Woodward Avenue, the property was used by Coggins Memorial C.M.E. Church, but urban renewal demolished the old church not long after.

On June 5, 1955, Rev. Amos led his congregation in procession from St. Aubin and Maple to Woodward and Blaine, and St. John's celebrated the occasion of their first services in their new location. Since that time, St. John's C.M.E. Church has maintained the buildings carefully and with pride.

### *The Changing Social Composition and Demographics of St. John's C.M.E. Church*

Since the late 1970s, St. John's Church has undergone major changes, both socially and demographically. The once thriving congregation, for a number of reasons, began a steady decline. It was considered a prestigious congregation, as its teas and annual days were considered major social events for the city's elite. St. John's was respected by the faith community comprised of many denominational affiliations. Though the prestige has not necessarily vanished, the luster of what once was still remains.

The church, situated along a row of influential congregations with some of the most beautiful architecture in the city of Detroit, is located in an ideal location, bordering the east and west sides of the city, minutes from downtown. To its immediate north is the famed Boston-Edison district, where notable personalities such as Henry Ford and Joe Louis once resided.<sup>3</sup> With so much historic value and notoriety, why has the

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<sup>3</sup> Boston-Edison. "History of the Boston-Edison Neighborhood."  
<http://www.historicbostonedison.org/history.shtml> (accessed December 20, 2012).



congregation not thrived in recent years? Why has the decline, which is common for many mainline denominational churches in urban centers, been so steep? Perhaps these questions can be best answered by taking a look at the demographics of the congregation, but also the region itself.

Right around the time that the St. John's congregation started to dwindle, the city of Detroit was experiencing a population shift as well. Urban flight and older persons moving out of state surely contributed. The U.S. Census Bureau notes that the city of Detroit, from 1960 until 2010, lost over nine hundred and fifty thousand people, the largest population shift for a major U.S. city during that time period.<sup>4</sup> However, other churches in the city continued to be developed and many experienced phenomenal growth during this time period. What, therefore, was it about St. John's that allowed its membership to drop from upwards of two thousand persons in the 1950s to a little more than 350 persons in 2012? The congregation demographics may hold certain clues.

Whereas there used to be many professionals in the congregation, many of which had a college degree or higher, the church now consists of mostly working class retirees, and has for some time. The education level of the parishioners is not a direct reason for a declining congregation, but the fact that many of these persons are now deceased and they have no remaining family members in the congregation certainly must be considered. The membership is made up of mostly older persons, 54% of the congregation is sixty-five or older, and many are well into their eighties. Only 5% of the membership lives in the same zip code of the church, and 41% stay outside of the city of Detroit altogether.

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<sup>4</sup> Gibson, Campbell. "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 TO 1990" Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census. (Accessed December 20, 2012).

The researcher suggests that so much of the church's decline over the past few decades has been due to a number of factors. These factors, which will be discussed at length in later chapters, include a loss of vision, the inability or unwillingness to adapt to the ever-changing context around them, as well as the lack of planning for the future.

*The City of Detroit: Motor City*

The city of Detroit, Michigan has a deep history. Detroit played a key role in the industrialization of America throughout the twentieth century. It is known as the Motor City due to the fact that it is the birthplace of the modern auto industry. Even though Detroit became one of the largest cities in the country, as well as becoming internationally known for manufacturing and industry, it remains one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States of America, though the city is predominantly black.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, the congregation has experienced much change theologically and physically. The average tenure for a pastor since 1962 has been roughly 7 years. This, in the researcher's opinion, has contributed to the diverse theological make-up of the congregation. A remnant segment of the church continues to strive for a commitment to the community, though this view is not embraced by all.

The history and the contemporary state of the St. John's C.M.E. Church are occasions for both celebration as well as concern. Celebration for the great and many accomplishments experienced, including the sojourn to Woodward Avenue, one of

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<sup>5</sup> Sugrue, Thomas J. "[A Dream Still Deferred](#)". *New York Times*. Nytimes.com (Accessed December 20, 2012)

Detroit's most prestigious neighborhoods. The concern comes as the question is raised: "so what?" To this writer, the life of the local church must always be focused on the "so what" issue. A religious institution's past makes very little difference as it relates to their current understanding of self and service. It is not enough to be, in a sense, satisfied with the achievements of brick and mortar if those confines are not effective in evangelism or used for discipleship purposes. As such, it becomes necessary for the church to weigh one's effectiveness not based on past accolades or victories won, but on how efficacious it is as it stands today. The ethos of the church must be grounded in Christ's mandates, including prophetic engagement with society. The St. John's Church, with its history of community outreach, particularly during the growing years, has not embraced a vision for service. This is unfortunate, considering that the community which holds and birthed the church has gone through many changes, including urban flight, rising crime and dilapidated homes. In fact, the church finds itself between the aristocracy and bureaucracy stages in the congregational life cycle, as it is somewhat efficient but mostly ineffective while being sustained by good memories and entrenched in institutional life. The church now stands in a prime position to be a great community voice and refuge. However, this can only be accomplished with a greater understanding of scripture, a clear vision and determined leadership, as opposed to standing on the laurels of the past. The celebration of past merits must be coupled with a greater hope for the future, along with an emphasis to minister prophetically to the community that has been largely overlooked.

### **Synergy**

The St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is in a blighted, once prosperous area of Detroit's west side. Lives have been affected by both the lack of job

opportunities, as well as limited access to food and health care. The crime rate is significant, as well as the dropout rate for high school students. Many persons in this area receive public assistance of some type. However, these perils present themselves, to those who understand the transformative power of God, as opportunities for a prophetic word which leads to intentional ministry. St. John's is not unfamiliar with the need to assist and being a source of aid to those in desperate need. During the Great Depression, for example, it was St. John's who partnered with others to bring support to those affected by the economic downturn. The church through the years, however, seems to have lost its way. The church that was once a prophetic voice for change during the Civil Rights movement, has not maintained its engagement with the community and that reality has been to its own detriment.

This author is convinced that all Christ taught us to do was in the context of community. We cannot be relevant as a church or transformative institution outside of the context of community. As such, there must be a great commitment first to those in the immediate environs of the church. One need not go far at St. John's to discover ministry opportunity, for all around the church are dilapidated homes, prostitution and the like. This refocusing begins, of course, from the pulpit. Oftentimes, persons must be taught how to care. Persons must be taught how to step back and open their eyes. If the preacher cannot assist the congregation with putting on a new set of lenses to see the need, then the preacher nor the church will be truly prophetic.

The need for intentional ministry for the St. John's Church will also not come to fruition unless the people are changed first. Part of the issue lies in the fact that the people, by and large, are not truly disturbed by what they see. Many are not disturbed

because they do not live in the area and therefore have the proverbial blinders on when they drive into the parking lot. There is contentment with having simply a programmed approach to ministry. Men's Days, Women's Days, Church Anniversaries and Grand Teas do not, however, meet the needs of people, nor do they place an emphasis on true ministry or prophetic engagement with society. The question must be asked in a general sense, "what are we known for?" The church must also ask the sobering question, "Are we known, at all?" There is a need, finally, to begin asking the "so what" question of ministry. The "so what" question is a general inquiry into how the success of a programmed event is linked to the larger and overall mission of the church and its relationship to the community. If the "so what" yields a negative or indifferent impact, then it is probably not useful, necessary or beneficial, in some cases, for the church to engage in said activity. It is sure that celebratory events are acceptable from time to time in the annual life cycle of the church. But in the midst of your celebration and fundraising are we remembering the poor, the naked, the destitute, the lost, left out, and left behind? Are we remembering those with no voice? And so the church is not engaged, partly, because it is not disturbed.

Persons who are disturbed about the communities in which they are apart inevitably develop a heart for the community. This disturbance and genuine concern leads to a sense of urgency to act to make a difference. Making a difference is certainly something that the St. John's Church has the ability to do. The church, with its' membership of over 400 persons, gifted seniors and young adult base, available classrooms and space is in a prime position to be used for numerous ministry functions. In recent years, the church has housed community health fairs, a funded and ongoing

computer literacy course, a funded and ongoing cooking and nutrition class, as well as hosting a local elementary school's basketball practices and team building exercises. These are all acts of progress; however, very few of the members have been a part of these advancements. Although the blessing is that many were in support of such programs, which make it likely that if given greater opportunity to be engaged, they might very well do so. God has blessed the congregation with land and properties which were once used for the good. This church, which has so much potential, needs to embrace again the concept that true success comes not in programs or events, but ongoing engagement with the surrounding community that makes a difference in the lives of people.

All of this is not to say that there have not been great attempts by former leaders to speak forth to the congregation regarding this need for community interaction. There was once adopted the theme of "Teaching, Worship, Fellowship, Healing, and Outreach." This five-fold ministry theme was useful but not embraced by the people. In fact, the final two concepts of healing and outreach were not primary, and thus not central to the church's mission. They were presented, but not taught. They were on posters but not taught, nor were they modeled for the congregation. As such, they never became a pervasive reality for the membership.

The question was raised in the spiritual autobiography was essentially how do we turn this church into what the community needs it to be. Again, the focus must be the community. This alludes to the earlier mandate and divine burden on in terms of the transformation of the valley. It is not enough to get replenished, revitalized and restored in the comfortable, non-threatening confines of church worship. Our mandate must be in

the transformation of our individual contexts of ministry. There is the need to give voice to those who have no voice. There will always be a need to raise those concerns which are truly shared concerns. Indeed, it appears that this Mother Church mentality can become a serious impediment to doing real ministry. This is especially true when the church has a history of persons joining simply because of the Great Migration and name recognition whereas now there are thousands of alternatives in the city of Detroit alone. The ultimate responsibility that pastor and church must embrace is the reclaiming and rewriting of the church's vision and mission. The church is at a place that is has never before been. It is at its lowest membership level since its early days. It is surrounded by drug and criminal activity. What were once sprawling estates in the Boston-Edison community are now run down Section 8 homes or drug houses. This is the new reality. As such, there are great opportunities here for prophetic engagement which begins first with the congregation. Those who receive the unction to be relevant and intentional about community interaction from the pulpit then must show forth this concern to the valley. The church must remind the world that they can live again, even as it reinvents itself seeking to do God's prophetic will.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY PROJECT/LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Justice: A Contemporary Challenge**

The researcher, in this chapter, will explore literature on the topics of justice, Wesleyan social ethics and prophetic preaching, as it pertains to the overall project. It will examine those who have composed writings on the aforementioned topics and why they are fundamental for understanding the development of a framework for preaching prophetically from a Wesleyan perspective.

The researcher's mentor at United Theological Seminary, Dr. Harold Carter, Jr., provided the peer group with a working definition of prophetic preaching. He stated, "Prophetic preaching is the authentic and undeniable proclamation of the Word of God to a people and culture with the intent of transforming people and culture into the will and purpose of God."<sup>6</sup> Cultural and societal transformation, thus, is the ultimate goal of prophetic preaching. Social justice seeks to do the same. A useful understanding of justice comes from Duncan Forrester, who writes: "In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, justice is understood in relational terms. [Justice is] a quality of relationship, it has to do

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Carter. "Prophetic Preaching Introduction." Lecture, United Theological Seminary Doctoral Intensive, Dayton, OH, January 24, 2011.



with the links of obligation, responsibility and care that bind people together in society.”<sup>7</sup> Justice must always be of the highest priority when discussing fairness and equality.

The distinction must be made between social justice and biblical justice. Whereas humanistic social justice concerns itself with matters of legalism and more secular issues, biblical justice deals primarily with the outpouring of God’s grace. This view of justice is of particular benefit to “those who are the victims of injustice or in danger of becoming so – the little ones, the weak, the stranger, those without power.”<sup>8</sup> With such a clear contrast, secular and legalistic justice versus grace, one can see why examples such as the woman caught in adultery in John 8 hold such power. After being questioned by the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees concerning the act of adultery and the most appropriate punishment, legalism would’ve seen the woman be stoned to death. However, biblical justice or grace prevailed as Jesus posited the seminal challenge, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” and later Jesus instructed the woman, “Go now and leave your life of sin.”<sup>9</sup> Biblical justice always has the twin goals of redemption and transformation.

Of the many texts written on the topic of religious or biblical social justice, *Faith and Justice: The Social Dimension of Evangelization* by Jean-Yves Calvez, defines the task quite well. Calvez writes from a Jesuit perspective, but his writing has many interdenominational benefits. He suggests, “The relation of faith to charity and of faith to justice, which the former demands and inspires, is not adequately understood unless there

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<sup>7</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 208.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Yves Calvez, *Faith and Justice* (St. Louis: Inst of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 80.

<sup>9</sup> John 8:11 NRSV

is a close relation between love of God and love of neighbor.”<sup>10</sup> One’s love of God, then, presupposes a love of neighbor. In fact, scripture teaches that love of God is ultimately inseparable from love for one’s neighbor.<sup>11</sup> This is a core and foundational component of social justice from a biblical perspective.

In *Welcoming Justice: God’s Movement Toward Beloved Community*, Charles Marsh deals with justice from the perspective of the Civil Rights Movement and the implications and challenges for the contemporary church. Marsh contends that, “Christians in North America must be known as people with a burden for the poor and oppressed, who plead the case of the poor, defending the weak, helping the helpless... We must as Christians seek justice by coming up with means of redistributing goods and wealth to those in need.”<sup>12</sup> The church’s Christian witness and influence, though perhaps weakening in a nation that is becoming less religious, must prioritize and seek good and equality for the benefit of all people. It should not become so politicized that it ceases to be a caring a redeeming community. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ suggests that you embrace the burden of prophetic engagement with society.

A recent article by Jack Jezreel entitled “Gospel-Driven Communities: Being a Church with the Biblical Vision of Justice” poses three important questions related to the ministry of social justice: (1) Is it possible to truly worship God and not care about our vulnerable sisters and brothers and the gifts of the earth we all share? (2) Is it possible to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 1:4 NRSV

<sup>12</sup> Charles Marsh & John M. Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God’s Movement Toward Beloved Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2009), 34.

follow Jesus and not find ourselves linked and in the company of sisters and brothers who are hungry, homeless, hopeless, slaves, lepers, and prostitutes? (3) Is it possible to read the Bible carefully and not be convinced of God's vision of human dignity, well-being, and wholeness?<sup>13</sup> He notes that, unfortunately, the answer is yes. This unsettling response is really at the heart of this project. The fact that an unholy indifference exists as it relates to the plight of our communities and the lost. Jezreel goes on to note that a community's desire for social mission is only as great as their perspective on the subject. Jezreel suggests,

If, on one hand, we think of outreach and justice work as an optional side dish to the real meal of church life, then we might admire church social ministry where it happens and shrug our shoulders where it doesn't. If on the other hand, we believe that caring for those who suffer the effects of economic injustice, inequality, and violence a 'constitutive' – that is, necessary, part of Biblical/Christian faith, then it should be assumed that church life in every place ought to reflect this.<sup>14</sup>

Those communities of faith who are disengaged from such a mission will not embrace, fully, the nature of social justice and outreach. Those communities, especially those of the pan-Methodist variety, who have such a rich history of justice and current creeds which embrace the same, should make it a priority from the earliest stages of membership training.

The researcher must also deal with how preaching informs and shapes theology and practice. In the book, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Post-Modern Ethos*, the authors note, "In the pre-modern church, the preacher

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<sup>13</sup> Jack Jezreel. 2012. "Gospel-driven communities: being a church with the biblical vision of justice." *Congregations* 39, no. 2: 14. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

typically assumed the validity of the bible and Christian doctrine. The preacher interpreted the tradition for the life of the community.”<sup>15</sup> However, in the post-modern world there is less emphasis on theology, perhaps to the detriment of the church. When preachers proclaim the Word, they are preaching to a mixed congregation; one that is made up of both a modern and post-modern context. Allen suggests:

As the world’s views turn, the preacher has a dual calling: (1) to help the congregation name how the Gospel can help create the emerging world and; (2) to consider points at which postmodern insights might cause the church to reflect on basic theological convictions concerning God, the Gospel, and the nature and purpose of the church and world.<sup>16</sup>

The church’s theology cannot be separate from its missiology. In fact, it is theology which shapes missiology. It must have a clear vision and rationale for its behavior, or lack thereof, in the world.

### *Wesleyan Fundamentals*

Of particular interest to the researcher are those writings that deal primarily with Wesleyan thought and practice. Wesleyan scholar, Manfred Marquardt, notes that from the infancy of Methodism, John Wesley was “confronted with the challenge for social work and recognized it to be an essential, inseparable part of the Christian life.”<sup>17</sup> Engagement with society was not an afterthought or a denominational mandate for the early Oxford Methodists. It was a fundamental part of what a Christian is to be. Randy

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>17</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1992), 23.

Maddox makes a corresponding point. He notes that Wesley's works of mercy done on the behalf of another was a means of sanctifying grace in that it demonstrated "the connection between love of God and love of others."<sup>18</sup> Again, this shows the depth of Wesleyan thought and the nature of biblical justice: there can be no love of God without a corresponding love of neighbor. Wesley, as demonstrated in later chapters, would go on to say our love of neighbor is demonstrated by what we do rather than by what we say.

Any discussion on literature dealing with John Wesley and the Methodist movement should almost certainly begin with a reference to Albert Outler and his work which defined the genre, *John Wesley*. Outler discussed Wesley utilizing Wesley's own writings and noted that Wesley's extensive collection of journal entries, sermons and denominational writings were really the best way to understand and dissect, if you will, John Wesley's theology. Outler argued that Wesley should not only be considered a great theologian, but that his greatness was in his ability to communicate the fundamental teachings of Christ to laypeople in a very broad and understandable fashion.

Randy Maddox's seminal text, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, approaches Wesley from the perspective of his thought and praxis. While many dismiss Wesley as a theologian, Maddox contends that, "Wesley touched on every major area of Christian doctrine at one time or other in his pastoral career. Moreover, he did not limit himself to doctrines whose implications for Christian life (or evangelism) were immediately evident."<sup>19</sup> As a result, Wesley's contribution to the field of theology is

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<sup>18</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 215.

<sup>19</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 15.

recognized and a debt of gratitude is owed to him for his in-depth thought, considerations and theological imagination.

M. Douglas Meeks has compiled a series of essays on Wesley's interaction with and message to the marginalized entitled *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*. This collection discusses the theological and practical approaches with which Wesley and early Methodists dealt with the poor and disenfranchised during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Meeks contends that "Wesley's unequivocal insistence that the poor are at the heart of the evangel and that life with the poor is constitutive of Christian discipleship."<sup>20</sup> Richard Heitzenrater responds to a question posed to him by a fellow professor:

Why did Wesley work with the poor? ...because first and foremost, because Jesus did so... If we accept God's truth revealed to us in Christ, we do not have to ask why Christ commanded us to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and clothe the naked, nor do we have to ask why Christ fed the hungry, visited the sick, or clothed the naked; we just need to do it, in faith and in love.<sup>21</sup>

Wesley believed, just as we should, that our lives are to mimic Christ. We are extensions of the love and grace of God in the world.

The topic of social justice ministry is one that has received much attention, as there are many historic and contemporary writings on the matter. Many practical theologians have discussed the topic from a missional standpoint. They have sought to answer the question: what is the role of the church? There are a number of handbooks for developing justice ministries in local churches. However, what's missing from so many of these volumes is developing justice ministry from a Wesleyan perspective. So much of

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<sup>20</sup> M. Douglas Meeks, *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 63.

social justice and prophetic engagement is an afterthought or a simple line item on a church's budget. There is, however, no real theological foundation for the praxis itself. If the theology is there, it's from a simply biblical point of view. Such views suggest we should do good unto others because that's what Jesus did. However, this understanding does not have much transformative weight.

John Wesley consistently highlighted as fundamental to a sufficient understanding of salvation the need for social responsibility, particularly in his later years. The maxim, "no holiness, but social holiness" is well-known primarily because it has been thought of by many Methodists in describing the need to focus on socioeconomic transformation and justice in the world. It has been used to attempt others to embrace movements such as Liberation Theology, Civil Rights, etc. However, Wesley's original meaning for the term rests in his belief that Christians ought to engage one another regularly for the purposes of mutual growth and maturity in the faith, such as through classes and small group ministries.<sup>22</sup>

So, while the dimension of corporate spiritual formation is always central in Wesley's affirmations of the social character of salvation, a second dimension can be discerned as well. He took it for granted that those who were being renewed and developed in the Methodist societies would be expressing this change in society at large. This is obvious as he discusses the nature of salvation:

By *salvation* [the Methodist] means holiness of heart and life. ... a Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given to him"; one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength." ... [and] this commandment is written in his heart, that "he who loveth God, loves his brother also." ... His

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<sup>22</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 211.

obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. ... Lastly, as he has time, he “does good unto all men”—unto neighbors, and strangers, friends, and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison,” but much more does he labour to do good to their souls.<sup>23</sup>

The social service and advocacy dimensions of salvation found their most formal expression in the General Rules of the Methodist Societies, which admonished Methodists to do no harm to others and to do as much good for the bodies and souls of others as they could.

Perhaps what is most significant about Wesley’s socioeconomic concern is the way the mature Wesley wove personal and socioeconomic transformation together by continuing to highlight the role of small support groups in nurturing both the inclination and tenacity for serving others in need and for struggling to transform societal structures. Here again we observe the wisdom of the whole Wesley, as he urged his followers to support one another in the pursuit of truly holistic salvation. It is for this very reason the reason holds in such high view a Wesleyan model for social justice. The Wesleyan model, as will be developed throughout the next few chapters, allows for prophetic engagement which both redeems and transforms. There is not only a practical ministry aspect to the model, but also an evangelistic dimension, as well. Such a model seeks to not only change society, but also seeks to speak holistically to the individual and community.

Much has been written about Wesley’s sermons. The clarity, spiritual genius, and imagination with which Wesley wrote are of particular interest to the researcher. This is

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<sup>23</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 41.



due, in part, to the fact that his sermons provide a framework for his overall theology. As it relates to social justice and engagement, Wesley writes, in his sermon “The Marks of the New Birth,” in speaking of the love of God which extends to love of neighbor, “being zealous of good works; the hungering and thirsting to do good, in every possible kind, unto all men; the rejoicing to ‘spend and be spent for them’, for every child of man, not looking for any recompense in this world, but only in the resurrection of the just.”<sup>24</sup> As such, one should seek to do good as an outgrowth or response to the love demonstrated first in Christ Jesus. It is a reasonable and faithful response.

### *Prophetic Preaching Design*

This research project depends heavily on the preached word to produce a desired result. Of the many styles and methods of preaching, the researcher has singled out prophetic preaching to accomplish the task. One of the critical needs in every congregation is an occasional yet intentional sermon rooted in the witness of the great biblical prophets. The preacher needs to play a role within the life of the congregation and surrounding community similar to that of Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah, who played fulfilled such roles in the life of the nations of Israel and Judah. Christine and James Ward note in their seminal text on the need to embrace prophetic preaching:

The natural inclination of the Christian community, like all religious communities, is to adapt its witness of faith to its most immediate human needs. In doing this the community always runs the risk of obscuring the wider dimensions of the gospel, particularly the wider implications of God’s demand for righteousness and justice. What is needed, therefore, is preaching that recovers

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<sup>24</sup> Albert Outler, *John Wesley’s Sermons: an Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 181.

these wider dimensions and illuminates the ways in which the community obscures them.<sup>25</sup>

By its very definition, prophetic preaching shifts the focus of a congregation from what is happening to them as an individualized church community to what is happening to us as a society at large. Prophetic preaching then dares to ask the question, “What is the task or the appropriate response of our congregation to the events that are occurring within our society and throughout the world?” Prophetic preaching singles out those false idols of comfort and of a lack of concern and acquiescence in the face of evil that can so easily replace the true God of the Bible who calls true believers to the active pursuit of justice and righteousness for every member of the society.

The prophets preached truth to power, attacking the crowned heads and the ruling elite for putting more confidence in armies and alliances than they did in the God who had brought them into that land. The prophets challenged the people of Israel who believed that God would never abandon them no matter how far the nation strayed from the covenant it had established with God back at Sinai. With an urgency that could not be contained and a zeal that could not be controlled, the prophets declared their “Thus saith the Lord” in spite of the ridicule, rebuke and absolute rejection that so many of them experienced throughout their lives. It is impossible to imagine the biblical narrative being told without the pronouncements of the prophets and the rejection that soon followed.

The researcher contends that it is easy to see the need for prophetic preaching in our churches and throughout our ever-changing society. Many Christians worship inside of immaculately maintained structures that are situated in neighborhoods that look like

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<sup>25</sup> James Ward and Christine Ward, *Preaching from the Prophets* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 11.

some third world countries after a civil war. Many Christians drive to these churches from the suburbs to buildings located within a community that has been ruined by poverty, drug infiltration, and the loss of industry through outsourcing and factory closings and underfunded and overwhelmed public school systems. Detroit, Michigan is surely an example of this phenomenon. Of course, many Christians never have to witness or confront the people and problems in these inner city communities, because they have moved out of the city to pristine suburbs and have brought their churches out to those upscale areas with them. For those who continue to travel into the crumbling and decaying cities of our nation it is crucial that they hear a prophetic word about the problems that surround their church, the social policies that are the root cause of those problems and what they can do as an expression of their biblical faith and witness to bring about change. For those who live and worship in exurbia and who never get close enough to the gritty side of America for anything to rub off on them, prophetic preaching becomes even more urgent. It is crucial that people with wealth, power and influence be challenged by a prophetic word that calls upon them to direct their resources not simply for tax advantages for themselves, but for a fairer and more just society for their fellow citizens.

The prophets reminded Israel, just as we need to be reminded through periodic rounds of prophetic preaching, that God is the creator and sustainer of the whole world. The God who sent Jonah to preach salvation to the Ninevites is the same God who used Babylon and Persia as instruments of God's will. The God who shaped Israel into a great people when they were delivered from the bondage in Egypt is the same God who can place Israel back into captivity and cause them to hang their harps upon the willows and

weep as they sit along the banks of the river and remember the life they once lived because of God's blessing. God's concern is for the whole of creation and for all the people that dwell therein. When the people of God lose sight of God's graciousness to all people and begin living as if only they and their nation really matter, the prophet must return them to a place of spiritual equilibrium and remind them of God's sovereign will and God's desire for justice for all.

Lenora Tubbs Tisdale captures the heart of prophetic preaching in her book *Prophetic Preaching: a Pastoral Approach*. She suggests that prophetic preaching "is inherently countercultural, for God frequently views our social orders and institutions as being corrupt and in need of transformation. But it is also hopeful, because through such proclamation we set before the people of God a new vision of an eschatological reality yet to come."<sup>26</sup> Thus, prophetic preaching, though ever evolving, has as its core the hope of better things to come and says, in effect, that trouble does not last always.

This preaching focused the people's attention on the issues that were broader than how to properly worship or how to perform ritual responsibilities. The Mosaic covenant included a progression of patent commandments to care for the widows, the orphans and the stranger who was among them. As the Hebrews lost sight of these directives, the prophets were present to call them to account. When churches become more interested in praise and worship and the maintenance of their buildings and annual day celebrations than in justice and peace for all, it is time for prophetic preaching. Now as then, there is a need to lift up the conditions of the marginalized and forgotten, including widows,

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<sup>26</sup> Lenora Tubbs-Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

orphans and strangers. Today they take the form of countless single women, many of whom live in overwhelming poverty after being deserted by husbands and boyfriends and are forced to raise their children alone. The world is saturated with children who have been left orphaned by the unrelenting ravages of disease and violence in North America and abroad.

The stranger is also present, though their identities have changed.

Contemporarily, they are the migrant workers who gather our food, the undocumented immigrants who clean our homes and hotel rooms. The stranger is also that person with an unfamiliar name or that Sikh from India who, because his religion requires him to wear a turban or some other kind of head wrap, is caught up in the post-9/11 fury created and sustained by a government that is always on the lookout for persons of interest.

Prophetic preaching does not stipulate or even call for the use of a text taken from one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It also does not require a reference to the biblical prophets. Prophetic preaching takes place when the preacher desires to bring the will of God to the attention of the people of God, and then, Lenora Tubbs Tisdale notes, challenge them “discern God’s activity in the world and become passionate about social justice (focusing on the external life of faith.”<sup>27</sup> Prophetic preaching occurs when the preacher has the audacity to speak truth to power not only in the comfortable confines of the church house but also in the public square, prisons and board rooms. This is the courage the prophetic preacher must be willing to embrace if he or she is to be faithful to and worthy of following in the footsteps of Samuel who confronted Saul, Nathan who confronted David, Amos who condemned Jeroboam, Jeremiah who challenged both

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and John the Baptist who did not grow cowardly in the presence of Herod Antipas. The challenge of prophetic preaching is as old as the Christian community itself. In fact, John Chrysostom offers a critical insight into preaching prophetically when he observed in the fourth century, “Preachers must tame the multitudes’ undisciplined and dangerous desire for pleasure and make them listen with greater benefit, so that they allow themselves to listen and be led by him, and he is not led by their lusts.”<sup>28</sup> The task of prophetic preaching is not a simple function, particularly inside the confines of a church more concerned with prosperity, building funds and an approach to worship that requires neither service nor sacrifice. Such empty religion is reminiscent of the type condemned in Amos and Micah. Instead, we need what James Forbes, retired pastor of the Riverside Church calls “spirituality for activism: a spirituality that can undergird, empower, and sustain us in our prophetic witness in the world.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 22.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

#### Theological Foundations

“Theology is not simply something to be known; theology is something lived and experienced by a particular community.”<sup>30</sup> Understanding theology in this way is helpful to any discussion on the evolution of thought as it relates to John Wesley’s social views and theology. One of the clearest distinctions of Wesleyan theology is that it tends not to focus on any one aspect of the person, but it is holistic in nature. It must be understood that Wesley was both an evangelist as well as a social reformer. As such, his focus was on the whole person. As a result, a large portion social theology, such as his theology of the poor, social holiness, works of mercy, etc. deal with a fusing of social justice as well as personal sanctification. Social ministry, for Wesley, is an outgrowth of one’s journey toward sanctification.

John Wesley compressed into a thimble the very essence of true religion. Put variously, he summed it up generally as “the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, as having first loved us,” or “our fellowship with the Father and with the Son.” He said he longed to see established in the world “a religion of love and joy and peace,

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<sup>30</sup> Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 23.

having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits.”<sup>31</sup>

This true religion was the “experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness.”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps his favorite Scriptural distillation, “faith thus working by love,” encompassed all he envisioned in the general summaries above. Further, it incorporated into one phrase the two, overarching grand scriptural doctrines implicit in these summaries that make explicit the gospel he preached: justification by faith and holiness.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, justification and sanctification constituted the full salvation John Wesley consistently preached for some fifty years. Holding these together as two convenient handles is fundamental to the Wesleyan witness. If one goes wrong here, the Wesleyan witness will go awry.<sup>34</sup>

For example, critics then and now have argued that Wesley retracted his teaching on sanctification when he began preaching justification, and, contrarily, that he reneged on justification later in the revival when he emphasized sanctification.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, contemporary scholars are wont to submerge justification into sanctification, so that it is swallowed up into what seems to result as an overriding message of sanctification. None of these were Wesley’s nor his peers’ understanding of the message that he preached. The

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<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 11. *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 46.

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2, 493.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>35</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Press, 1994), 20.



best view of Methodist theology is the one Wesley vigorously insisted on a year before he died. He said he still witnessed the same confession he had for fifty years, holding consistently together both justification by faith and holiness.<sup>36</sup> One's view in this regard affects not only one's understanding of the nature of Wesley's message but also whether or not and in what regards his message was personal and/or social.

So, the fundamental doctrines of justification and sanctification testify to the dual nature of his theology and provide the basis for a proper understanding of its personal and social elements. A brief definition of what John Wesley meant by the terms justification and sanctification illuminates what he meant by true religion. Wesley defined justification by faith as a "deliverance from guilt and punishment" of sin "by the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing on Him."<sup>37</sup> It is "present pardon and acceptance with God." God's acceptance comes through faith. This faith of acceptance is a sure confidence in the meritorious cause of one's acceptance, Jesus Christ's atoning death on the cross.<sup>38</sup> Faith is the divine, inner conviction that "Christ loved me and gave Himself for me."<sup>39</sup> In the instant one has faith, one is justified. The faith part of the summary expression, "faith working by love," is short for justification by faith.

The second grand Scriptural doctrine, sanctification, commences once a sinner is justified by faith and accepted of God. The "working by love" part of the expression

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 7:317.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7:319.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 17.

“faith working by love” is short for sanctification. Once the justified experiences the pardoning God’s love and knows He who “was offended is now reconciled,” love for God is poured into one’s heart.<sup>40</sup> A new birth ensues that entails a radical transformation of the heart from love of the world to love of God and others. This is the beginning of sanctification or holiness.<sup>41</sup> From this beginning, holiness generally gradually develops such that the saved sinner grows in grace, more and more dies to sin, and is zealous of good works, both works of piety and mercy. Development continues until with a single, pure intention one loves God “with all our heart and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves.”<sup>42</sup>

Now, turn for a moment to consider with John Wesley the place, value, and relationship of justification and sanctification. Keeping these in their proper places ensures a proper perspective of the Wesleyan concern for personal salvation and social concern. Justification and sanctification can each, separately or together, be called salvation.<sup>43</sup> Both are equal constituent parts that must be held together in tension and equilibrium. Neither is to be belittled or to gain ascendancy over the other. Both complement salvation. Wesley said, “They [Methodists] take care to keep in its own place, laying equal stress on one and the other.”<sup>44</sup> They maintained them with equal zeal and diligence. Wesley consciously desired to avoid the extreme of those who, on the one

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>41</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 2:158.

<sup>42</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), 55.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, 83.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 507.

hand, spoke well of justification but were ignorant or confused about sanctification; or of those, on the other hand, who were unacquainted with justification and confounded it with sanctification. Indeed, some in the Protestant Reformation tradition in Wesley's own day as well as in modern times, such as Rudolf Bultmann, view justification as the summit of religion. There are others who, taking a more Catholic perspective, mix justification and sanctification.<sup>45</sup> In our own day, various liberation theologies and the social gospel very popular with clergy and church leaders give short shrift to justification by faith and personal aspects of sanctification.

Rounding out his views on the value of justification and sanctification as the inextricable co-essentials of the Gospel, Wesley drew on the Apostle Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:13. He noted that as glorious and honorable as faith is, love (sanctification) is more excellent. Justification by faith is the door of religion, but sanctification is the room, religion itself. Justification is the means, sanctification the end. Logically prior, justification by faith is the handmaid of love and the grand means of restoring humankind to the love from which he was fallen. Justification encompasses the relative change of what God does for us; sanctification, the real change of what God does in us. That is, justification brings about the reversal of relations between God and humankind, enabling sanctification to transform both the believer's heart and human nature.<sup>46</sup>

When considering John Wesley's social witness, keep in mind his assumption that true religion includes justification and sanctification as the one, grand possibility for fully

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2:38-40.

redeeming humankind from all evils, both of soul and body. Not just justification or sanctification alone, but both working together in their proper relation, sequence, and place. The social witness of love through outward, good works and acts of mercy subordinates itself to the larger end of true religion. Unequivocally, the higher end to be kept in view doing works of mercy is the saving of souls from death.<sup>47</sup> The ultimate aim of Wesley's social ethic is individual renewal. This is the precondition for social renewal and prophetic engagement.<sup>48</sup> Among church leadership and our clergy, this principle needs urgent recovery.

Be that as it may, the true religion of love of God and of humankind is twinned companions and coadjutants working in tandem to achieve virtue and happiness across the land. Only the love that flows from and is experienced in justification by faith shows fruits, which work no ill to neighbor and issue in every kind of beneficence. As Wesley said, there is no other "straight way to the religion of love" but through justification by faith.<sup>49</sup> Justification is God's transcendent dimension touching the inner person that results in the love that has a social concern. Likewise, justification by faith must express itself in love, when given opportunity, to prove itself authentic reconciliation with God. True religion, both the love of God and of all humankind, none other, is "the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the ills of a disordered world, for all the miseries

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 3:393.

<sup>48</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 3:295.

and vices of men.”<sup>50</sup> This love of God and the love of all humankind is what Wesley described as “the religion we long to see established in the world.”<sup>51</sup>

Building upon this foundation, it is helpful to address a relevant issue and the subject of ongoing debate into the twenty-first century. In what ways is the Gospel John Wesley preached both personal and social? Our Book of Discipline says we “proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners.”<sup>52</sup> Are the two in harmony? Let me immediately alleviate any anxiety by saying John Wesley’s theology is both personal and social.

Consider the meaning of the word personal. One dictionary defines personal as what pertains to, concerns, or affects the individual person as opposed to others or the general community.<sup>53</sup> If John Wesley’s theology is anything, it is personal through and through. The power of his preaching was his offer to persons in his generation genuine religion, available to each person. Not until the gospel became personal to him did he understand this. Experiencing the very personal nature of the Gospel was integral to his own transformation. The Moravian leader August Spangenberg asking him soon after he landed in Georgia, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley could only respond for the generality of humankind, “I know He is the savior of the world.” Spangenberg pressed him, “Do you know He has saved you?” Not until two years later, in the spring of 1738, could he answer a personal yes. Then the Gospel became real within his own heart. He

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>51</sup> *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 49.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> The Compact Oxford English Dictionary, second edition.

testified famously, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”<sup>54</sup> To ignore or attempt to rationalize away the personal elements in his theology is to do it a great injustice and miss it entirely.

There are several particular ways the Gospels he preached is personal. First, through the universal reality of all humankind is in some ways affected by the Gospel, the grand scriptural doctrines, by nature, are distinctly directed to and meant to address the individual person. Each and every person is accountable before God. Each person stands utterly guilty before God. Sin is one’s own and none else’s. Likewise, each and every person is particularly loved, chosen, and marked out to be the recipient of God’s graciousness and beneficence. Of course, each person must choose to receive the grace by faith. Just as Jesus singled out the hemorrhaging woman in a crowd, each person is treated as though he or she alone and no one else is the focus of Jesus Christ’s atoning work.<sup>55</sup>

Second, the Gospel is personal in another way. In fact, the Gospel is doubly personal in that it is revealed to the individual person by a Person. The transcendent, personal God who was “in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” is personally present to the individual person. John Wesley said, “The knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion.”<sup>56</sup> That is, one cannot be justified or sanctified without knowledge of the Three-One God. God in Jesus

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<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1938), 1:151.

<sup>55</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 2:385.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Christ confronts the sinner regarding his or her sin. God is Jesus Christ reveals himself individually to the penitent sinner and speaks personally to him or her, and us, words of pardon. Each person who will believe may hear his voice say specifically to him or her, “Thou even thou, art reconciled to God.” God “hath sent forth the Spirit into my heart, crying ‘Abba, Father.’” John Wesley envisioned this intimate, antiphonic conversation between God and child, “Thou art the man! I want thee for my Lord.”<sup>57</sup>

Third, the Gospel is personal in that the faith of justification and sanctification is by its very nature an inner, super-sensual personal awareness. John Wesley declared, “The root of religion lies in the heart, in the inmost soul...”<sup>58</sup> For him, personal religion has its seat, its epicenter in the inner being of a person which is the heart and soul. True, Christian religion is the apprehension of the objective reality of God in one’s inner experience.<sup>59</sup> Pure and undefiled religion arises when God touches the interior faculties of heart and soul.<sup>60</sup> The great work God does, He does in the soul.<sup>61</sup> Saving faith is an event that happens to the person in such a way that the person knows the transcendent God is engaging him or her. It is an inner apprehension that Christ loved and gave himself for them. The person becomes conscious that he or she is the focal point and object of God’s redeeming activity in the here and now.<sup>62</sup> So, the object of Gospel is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 125.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 1:698.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 2:168.

<sup>62</sup> Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 149.

personal in at least two ways: it is directed to the person by the transcendent Person and experienced within a person.<sup>63</sup>

Having said this, the Gospel is also social. The term social has a number of important shades of meaning that may lead conversing persons into misunderstanding when using the same term in different ways. A clue to two important ways John Wesley used it is gleaned from the only place in his many volumes of works where he used the term, social holiness. This term is often quoted and equally misapplied today; Wesley used in the preface to his list of poetical works. He wrote: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>64</sup> In the preface, he was countering the Christian mystics’ notion of holiness that withdraws itself from society into entire seclusion from others. This monastic view tried to build on the foundation of justification by retreating in order to purify the soul. This is a view that Wesley totally denounced.<sup>65</sup>

To the contrary, believers are nourished when they abide in Jesus Christ and are knit together in assembly with one another. When he speaks of holiness as social, he is arguing that persons grow in holiness and into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ when in mutually edifying social company and fellowship. Wesley’s passionate commitment to Methodist society and class meetings is renowned. As many Wesley scholars observe, his point in speaking of social holiness was not to draw a distinction between the personal and social gospel as is done in contemporary American theology. Rather, he was saying that Christianity cannot subsist at all without society, without

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>64</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 321.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



living and conversing with other men.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, social means that which is capable of being associated with others and marked by mutual relations enjoyed in the company of those with kindred interests.<sup>67</sup>

The second important sense in which he uses the term social is again in debate with the mystics. He reacts to the mystics' idea of solitary religion as the way to achieve sanctification. The mystics' way did not trouble itself with outward works. Wesley said, "If thou wilt be perfect, say they, trouble not thyself about outward works. It is better to work virtues in the will." Moreover, the one who attains true resignation separates him or herself from outward things.<sup>68</sup> Wesley repudiated this view that distanced itself from outward, good works. "Solitary religion is not to be found there in the gospel of Christ," he declared. The one who loves God loves others. The one who loves his or her brethren as Christ loved them, cannot but be "zealous of good works."<sup>69</sup> Upon God's pardon through faith in the merits of Jesus' atoning death, the love of God is immediately poured into the believer's heart. The working by faith piece of John Wesley's favorite expression faith working by love is actualized. Sanctification commences. Inner renewal occurs and genuine love for neighbor is given so the believer loves his or her neighbor as his or her very own soul. Methodists receive a love in which they love, as Wesley said, "every soul which God hath made," and every person "on earth, as our own soul." When this "love is shed abroad in his heart...the love of neighbor sweetly constrains him to love every child of man with...a love of benevolence, of tender goodwill to all the souls that God has

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<sup>66</sup> Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition.

<sup>68</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 321.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

made.”<sup>70</sup> Believers are zealous to relive the “distress of our neighbor, whether in body or soul.”<sup>71</sup> The incomparable motivational force of God’s love was personally revealed to Wesley. He confessed he sought this love of true religion for many years to no avail. But when coming under its full conviction, he declared it to all.<sup>72</sup>

The outworking of justified faith in love is such that it cannot but put forth branches of outward obedience.<sup>73</sup> True, living faith was necessarily productive of all good works and all holiness (sanctification).<sup>74</sup> The child of God is like an apple tree. If the tree has life, it will produce apples. Good works are joined to faith as an effect is joined to its cause. The relationship is so direct, if one willingly neglects good works, he or she cannot reasonably expect, that he shall ever be sanctified. Moreover, one cannot grow in grace, retain the grace received, or continue in the favor of God without faith world itself by love.<sup>75</sup> John Wesley proclaimed, “It is incumbent on all that are justified to be zealous of good works.”<sup>76</sup> He declared, “None are finally saved but those whose faith ‘worketh by love.’”<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, since every one when he or she believes is sanctified, this sanctification must be both of heart and life. Sanctification of heart and life must

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<sup>70</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 3:295.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:315.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 14:451.

<sup>74</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 1:125.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 164.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, 4:175.

express itself in inward and outward good works. Namely, love produced by faith has both an inward and outward aspect. The inward aspect of sanctification comprehends a personal, inherent change in the inward tempers, qualities, virtues, and dispositions, and in the outward aspect a change of personal behavior that keeps the commandments and does good works. These outward good works include both works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety take in such things as public, family, and private prayer; studying Scripture; fasting; and receiving the Lord's Supper. Works of mercy flow from a love of neighbor and relate to both bodies and souls of persons, including feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; entertaining the stranger; visiting those who are in prison, sick, or afflicted; instructing the ignorant; and comforting the feebleminded, among other things.<sup>78</sup>

Wesley is truly a model theologian in Christian history who diligently tried to keep together and in proper relation evangelical faith and love, justification by faith and good works, inward and outward religion and, what one could say today, the personal and social gospel. He lamented it was Satan's work to separate inward from outward religion and set them at variance with one another.<sup>79</sup>

Two comments follow from John Wesley's view of social holiness. They may help clear up contemporary misunderstandings. First, there is a common misapprehension that justification pertains to the personal, and sanctification pertains to the social in the Wesleyan witness. This is only partly correct. For Wesley, justification is personal. Sanctification is both personal and social. Indeed, he stated clearly that social

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<sup>78</sup> Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 163.

<sup>79</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 1:592.

sanctification that consists only of outward ceremonies and forms and the doing of much good is a counterfeit outward religion. He said, “Holiness can have no commence in the soul till that change be wrought...till we are born again.”<sup>80</sup> This inner work is the heart part of his phrase “holiness of heart and life.”

He deemed sanctification a “poor farce and a mere mockery of God,” “bare external religion,” and a “round of outward duties” without the inner personal experience of divine reality within.<sup>81</sup> Whether one attends regularly public and private worship, prays, partakes of communion, studies the Bible, visits the sick and imprisoned, feeds the hungry, engages practically in the struggle against poverty, works to transcend racial and color boundaries, commits to overcoming violence and the nonproliferation of arms, takes steps to affect the environment positively, or whatever else it may be, if the personal dimension of sanctification has not begun, holiness is an empty charade and worthless. One may do good, and have no religion at all.<sup>82</sup>

Instead, Wesleyan holiness has every bit as much to do with the inward person as with outward, social actions. Outward good works are the outworking of an inner, personal work of God in the soul. Moreover, the personal and social aspects of sanctification are in a synergistic, cooperative relationship. They act together to increase the effect of one another. Personal growth in holiness works with outward good works increasing love and good works. Increased zeal for outward, good works cooperates in tandem with personal holiness further deepening personal, holy virtue.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 185; 194f

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 1:219f.

Second, when Wesley wrote about social holiness, he meant something different from what church leaders often today mean by the social gospel. Social gospel advocates erroneously equate true religion with social redemption from the collective sin of institutions and social structures.<sup>83</sup> Neither is social holiness a liberation theology, in which biblical texts are interpreted and given the meaning of some sociopolitical ideology like Marxism, socialism, feminism, etc.<sup>84</sup> Neither is salvation to be viewed as liberating society from the political-economic structure of the capitalist system or collective oppressed groups from racism, chauvinism or homophobia. Social witness and prophetic ministry have these as their goals.

Contemporary clergy have assumed it is the bounden duty of social holiness to concentrate Sunday morning sermons on such themes. Doing so is not in accord with John Wesley's theology or admonition to the clergy. He did allow that now and then, when appropriate, a preacher might defend a political figure. Nevertheless, he was clear: "It is our main and constraint business to preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified."<sup>85</sup> Homiletically speaking, the sermon must include the liberating work and atoning death of Jesus Christ as a means and motivation to doing acts of mercy socially, including prophetic engagement.

Wesley's desire for social transformation or prophetic engagement with society is rooted in a commitment to love neighbor as one loves God. But it is also rooted in his belief that such societal engagement takes place as a supplement to the spreading of the

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<sup>83</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1983 ed., s.v. "Social Gospel."

<sup>84</sup> Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 7

<sup>85</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:154.

Gospel. Those of us who are trying to live the Wesleyan way have a great challenge. One of Wesley's great contributions to Christendom was the linkage of passionate commitment to Christ with courageous social witness. Wesley believed that wherever the good news of Christ is preached and received, social holiness follows. For Wesley, offering Christ and performing acts of mercy are one in the same.

### *Biblical Foundations*

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, justice emerges as a theme, a virtue, and an ethical practice. In this section, the researcher will discuss the biblical foundations as it relates to the recovery of communal prophetic witness. The two texts chosen for this purpose, Luke 11:37-44 and Micah 6:8 both speak of this great need that speaks even to today's communities of faith. The global community has experienced great advances in education, technology, science, and political and religious affairs, yet one thing remains constant: suffering. Whether it be the struggles of a single parent, the hardships that children and youth have to bear, a widowed mother, continued slavery, or the abuse and violence endured by so many, the cry of the poor is ever-present. The work of justice remains central to the biblical tradition and its vision for life and God's people are called to respond accordingly.

In dealing first with the Lukan narrative, it is necessary that we begin with the basic definition of a Pharisee, a term found frequently in the gospels. This understanding is fundamental because it was at the house of a member of this group that this incident took place. Jesus' words were addressed to the evils of Pharisaism. Therefore, we must understand who the Pharisees were and how they related to Christ and His ministry in first-century Palestine. In short, the Pharisees were the biblical fundamentalists of their

day. In fact, the actual term Pharisee may be derived from a term which means to separate.<sup>86</sup> The beginnings of the Pharisees as a distinct religious sect seem to have originated in our around the second century B.C. Eventually they became removed and distant from the politically established regimes, such as the zealots.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the Pharisees sought to effect spiritual holiness and reformation. They contended that Israel's condition was the result of sin in general and disobedience to the Law, in particular. As such, their intent was to identify, communicate, and facilitate obedience to God's law and in effect, generating holiness and paving the way for the kingdom of God to be established on earth.

As it relates to the fundamentals, the Pharisees believed in nearly everything we do. They were convinced of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.<sup>88</sup> They also believed in many of the supernatural aspects of the faith, such as Satan, heaven (the earthly kingdom), angels, hell and the resurrection of the dead.<sup>89</sup> So when a passage such as Luke 11:37-44 is considered, what is the major issue that Jesus has with this group if their core beliefs are not really that different from ours? The problem with the Pharisees is not necessarily in what they believed, and not even in what they purposed to do; the problem was in what they became and what they actually did. Their aims and core beliefs were essentially correct and noble, but they were diverted from such goals. For example, as opposed to being the first to recognized Jesus Christ as Messiah, they were among the

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<sup>86</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 158.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>88</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus," in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, ed. by Jacob Neusner, et. al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 264.

<sup>89</sup> Sandmel, *Judaism*, 10.

first to reject Him. Rather than turning the nation to Him, they endeavored to turn the nation against Him.

The basic problem with the Pharisees is a concern still experienced in contemporary times and in modern churches. Core beliefs and a strong adherence to doctrinal statements do not make religious institutions great, regardless of denomination. There must be, coupled with a strong doctrinal foundation, a commitment to live out those doctrinal basics, particularly as it relates to a concern for neighbor and the betterment of society.

So what actually went wrong with the Pharisees that caused Jesus to pronounce these woes upon them in the eleventh chapter of the third gospel? To a large degree, the error of the Pharisees was an error with regard to divine revelation. While they did believe the Old Testament to be divinely inspired, they came to dwell too heavily on the law, to the neglect of the prophets. Eventually they relied too much so on the letter and not on the spirit of the Law.<sup>90</sup> They were too fixated on the details of the Law and not on its design, its purpose.

In the end, it was not the actual written Law as their primary focus, but on the oral law and on their many interpretations of that law, which were written in a myriad of volumes. The written Law became only of secondary import, while their traditions became primary. In those places where the traditions of the Pharisees contradicted the written Law, it was tradition that prevailed.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew 15:1-11 NRSV



As the researcher has considered the Pharisees and their conflict with Jesus, the biblical text and research shows that the Lord had several major areas of conflict with them. First was their self-righteousness, their belief that they were spiritually superior to others and pleasing in God's sight. Second was their handling, or mishandling, of the Old Testament. Third was their tradition, to which they gave higher priority than the revealed Word of God. Fourth was their resistance to Christ, and their efforts to discredit Him and to turn the nation from Him.<sup>92</sup>

Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees as a group informs us that every group has its own tendencies toward error, its own temptations and failures. It is especially interesting to note that the Pharisees are not too dissimilar from evangelical conservatives in the Protestant mainline denominations of our day, including Methodists. The term, fundamentalist, is one which is proudly worn by some and disdainfully bestowed by others, but by whatever term we may choose to label ourselves, the Pharisees were that group of people in the gospels which most closely resembles this branch of Christianity. As well-intentioned as this group was, as correct as they were in so many areas of basic religious truths, they were some of our Lord's strongest adversaries. They did not recognize Him as the Messiah, they rejected and resisted Him, and they played a large role in His rejection by the nation. The study of this group and of their errors, as exposed by Jesus, should be of the greatest interest to those of us who are so like them.

Jesus' response to the Pharisee's concern is an answer to his surprise at the Lord's avoidance of ceremonial washing. While Jesus is addressing His host, He is also

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<sup>92</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society, A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), 8.

confronting the evils of the Pharisaic system, of which this man is a part. Thus Jesus' answer is a response to all of Pharisaism.

Jesus' words here are difficult to follow because the imagery changes so quickly and so often. The overall thrust is the contrast between the outside, which is secondary, and the inside, which is primary. Jesus begins by talking about the washing of the outside of a cup or a dish, but then moves to the inside of a person.<sup>93</sup> He then moves back to the dish imagery and tells His host that he can make the dish clean by emptying its contents and giving them to the poor.

As such, the overall impact of Jesus' words is clear. Jesus differs from His host and the other Pharisees by seeing the inside as more important than the outside, the heart as being more important than appearances, a person's attitudes and motives as more important than one's actions. The Pharisees believed that a person is made holy by working from the outside in. Jesus believed that holiness, as well as defilement, came from the inside, out. The Law dealt with external things, but its purpose was to teach Israel with reference to the heart. Jesus could therefore summarize the whole Law in terms of love: love for God and love for one's neighbor. Jesus taught that seeing the Law's application only to outward acts was inadequate and inconsistent with God's intent in giving the Law.<sup>94</sup> He taught that obedience to the Law must be a matter of spirit, and not just of letter. This was not an added meaning, but the original meaning of the Law. The Pharisees did not see it this way.

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<sup>93</sup> Leah Bronner, *Sects and Separatism During the Second Jewish Commonwealth* (New York: Block Publishing Co., 1967), 70.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Apparently the Pharisees explained their emphasis on the outward, the “outside of the cup” by insisting that it was important because God made it. We must keep the outside of things clean, including ourselves, because God made them. Jesus simply points out that God also made the inside, and thus they, by the same logic, should be kept clean as well. When viewed by outward measures, the Pharisees looked good, but Jesus exposed the vileness of their hearts. When we look at the gospels as a whole we see that the greed and wickedness of the Pharisees was worked out in ways that seemed commendable, in ways that looked pious, in ways that may have even brought them praise, but which were evil.<sup>95</sup>

Jesus then told the Pharisee that the way to clean up was to empty the contents of the dish, what was inside, and thus all things would be clean. It is really a very simple image. One cannot clean the inside of a dish if the dish is full. One of the evils of the Pharisees was greed, and Jesus proposed generosity as its antidote.<sup>96</sup>

Though we do not know how this lone Pharisee responded to Jesus’ remarks, but it appears that he had no opportunity to speak, as Jesus followed quickly with three woes. The term woe is another significant element in understanding the words of Christ. It is not so much a stinging rebuke as much as it is an expression of grief.<sup>97</sup> For example, when we declare, “Woe is me,” we are neither rebuking nor cursing ourselves, rather than simply expressing our grief.

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<sup>95</sup> Matthew 23:5-7 NRSV

<sup>96</sup> Luke 16:14

<sup>97</sup> Saldarini, *Judaism*, 34.

The first woe concerns the Pharisees' focus on the fine points, while omitting the fundamentals. In a sense, they were majoring in the minors. "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone."<sup>98</sup> The Pharisees were meticulous in the details of the Law, and yet they lost sight of the design of the Law. In the words of our Lord, they "strained gnats and swallowed camels."<sup>99</sup> Jesus did not criticize the keeping of the Law in its small points, but He did say that the major thrust of the Law, which are justice and the love of God, must be fulfilled. While both are important, the former is secondary; the latter, primary.

The second woe concerns the Pharisees' preoccupation with position, prestige, and the praise of men, as Luke 11:43 states, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces." According to Jesus, the Pharisees were "full of greed and wickedness."<sup>100</sup> They were not publicly regarded as such, however. These hypocrites loved the praise of people and to be placed in positions of privilege and honor. In short, they sought the praise of humanity, rather than the praise of God. Having this motivation, they could not speak the truth, nor could they interpret the Scriptures accurately, because then they would have been hated and rejected, just as the prophets, who did interpret the Old Testament Scriptures accurately and who spoke truthfully.<sup>101</sup> Incidentally, it is interesting that Jesus accused the

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<sup>98</sup> Luke 11:42 NIV

<sup>99</sup> Matthew 23:24

<sup>100</sup> Luke 11:39 NIV

<sup>101</sup> Saldarini, *Judaism*, 102.

Pharisees of desiring greetings in the marketplaces. It was in the marketplaces that they would have contact with those they considered unclean, and probably those from whom they received honor and praise. It was this very defilement which, in their minds, necessitated the ceremonial washings which they so diligently observed.<sup>102</sup>

The third woe is the most painful and pointed. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being a source of defilement, rather than of purification: “Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it” (Luke 11:44). In the Law which the Pharisees revered the Israelites were taught that a person was rendered ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with a grave.<sup>103</sup> The Pharisees thought of themselves as holy, and they saw their contribution as leading the nation in the direction of holiness. Jesus told them that the exact opposite was in fact true. They were themselves both unclean and defiling to others. Those who came into contact with the Pharisees were thus rendered unclean.<sup>104</sup> That which the Pharisees prided themselves in being and doing was the very opposite of the truth. This was clearly the most stunning blow of all to the self-righteous Pharisees.

The Lukan text is significant because it demonstrates to us that the Pharisees were well-intentioned people who had simply lost their way. They abandoned the spirit of the Law and all that it represented, particularly in the areas of bettering society, widows, orphans and the destitute and marginalized. All of this in exchange for an adherence to human-defined rules and ritual. The Pharisees could have been an influential sect used to

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Numbers 19:16 NRSV

<sup>104</sup> Dunn, *Pharisees*, 210.

motivate others to adhere to the law as a whole, thus making first-century Palestine a place where social ministry and activism was the norm and not the exception; however, they were too caught up in their own liturgical ideas about how to maintain their own structures and traditions. What a tragedy it is that so much of what we know as the Christian church has this as its reality. So many in the church want to dominate with their own set of beliefs and exercise control and authority, while there are persons on the margins who simply want to be welcomed and ministered to. Contemporary Pharisees crowd out the church by not making room for the very ones their faith calls them to be faithful to.

The context of Micah 6:8 is a great companion setting for the indictment that was just spoken against the Pharisees in Luke's gospel. The difference in Micah, however, is that the setting is that of a spiritual courtroom, as opposed to a dinner table. It is in this court that the Lord God offers his complaint against His people. It is as though Micah pictures a court of law, with Israel on trial before the Lord. Normally you would go to the city gate and have the elders hear the case.<sup>105</sup> But God is going to have the mountains hear the case. They've been around a long time and they've seen what God has done and what Israel has done. It is in this great context that the court comes to order.

The background for this text is the covenant or Mosaic Law. God had already informed them exactly what was expected of them and thus it is in the context of law violations that God took them to court. As Israel steps up to take the witness stand, God asks them if He can truly be found guilty as God. Of course God knows he has done nothing but good to Israel, yet somehow has been reimbursed with rebellion and

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<sup>105</sup> Wayne Caldwell. "Micah." *Asbury Bible Commentary*. ed. Eugene Carpenter and Wayne McCown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 74.

rejection. The truth is that not only did God not do evil to Israel, He also did them an enormous amount of good, not the least of which was redeeming them and giving them godly leaders.

In verse five, he calls them to remember a particular scene, when Balaam, after meeting with King Balak of Moab, prophesied over Israel four times.<sup>106</sup> As he brought forth the word of God, he did not curse Israel but, instead blessed them each time. When he was unsuccessful in cursing Israel, Balaam answered Balak on how to bring the nation under a curse. Instead of trying to have a prophet curse them, the Moabites lead them into fornication and idolatry, and God will curse them. Balak did exactly that, sending his women into the camp of Israel to lead Israel into sexual immorality and idolatry.<sup>107</sup> As a result, God did curse Israel, bringing a plague of judgment that killed twenty-four thousand. In light of this, Israel must remember that God could never be persuaded to curse Israel, except if they brought such punishment on themselves through their own disobedience and rebellion. Again, like a great lawyer in court, God shows Israel that if they feel cursed in any way, it is wholly their responsibility.

Verses six and seven are the people's reply to God. "Okay God, just what do you want? How many more sacrifices? Their questioning demonstrates that they are not repentant. They are basically asking God what His price is. The reader can almost hear Israel shouting at God from the witness stand. "You ask too much, God. Nothing will satisfy you. If we brought "thousands of rams" or "rivers of oil" or even my own "firstborn" it would not be enough. They approach the Lord God as if He is unreasonable.

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<sup>106</sup> Longman, Tremper, III. "Micah." *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*. ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

Waltke notes, “Blinded to God’s goodness and character, he reasons within his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change; God must change . . . His willingness to raise the price does not reflect his generosity but veils a complaint that God demands too much.”<sup>108</sup>

God stops the shouting of the angry defendant from the witness stand. He says, in essence, “You act as if it is some mystery what I require of you. In point of fact it is no mystery at all. I have shown you clearly what is good and what I require of you.” The LORD answers the contentious witness in open court. Simply do three things: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” In fact, this is the entire theme of the book of Micah.<sup>109</sup> Israel had violated all of these ideals. Because of this God can declare them guilty. The edict of the Lord is clear in that they are to practice justice regularly. Samuel Schultz notes that, “Struggling to develop a theological vision of God’s all-encompassing justice is not without communal benefits.”<sup>110</sup>

First, it compels God’s people to wrestle with the implications of their actions upon the lives of others.<sup>111</sup> This communal wholeness is the aim of the entire book itself. In 1:10-16, Micah laments the fate of several towns in the Judean countryside. These satellite cities evidence both the guilt of Judah and the ensuing punishment. They serve as a reminder that life is never lived in a vacuum. Clearly the policies and programs of the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Schultz, Samuel J. *The Old Testament Speaks*, Fourth ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 122.

<sup>111</sup> Rick Marrs, “The Prophetic Faith: A Call to Ethics and Community,” *Restoration Quarterly* 36 (1994), 305.



capital Jerusalem affected, disastrously, the villages of the Judean countryside. Not surprisingly, just as Micah strived to sensitize his audience to the ramifications of societal policies upon the less powerful, so Paul frequently tied behavior and decision making in the church to a concern for the other. Secondly, Marrs notes, this struggle to live out communal justice serves as a constant reminder of the gulf between God's will and ways and those of his people.<sup>112</sup> This is beautifully illustrated in the text, where Micah charges the people with failing to remain loyal to the covenant relationship. Their faithlessness is especially surprising in the light of the Lord's repeated and consistent saving acts. In response to such charges, the people question what increase they might give to God to assuage his apparently hurt feelings.<sup>113</sup> Their response clearly indicates their complete misconception of God's desires and will. For them, the Lord's unhappiness can be alleviated by increasing the percentage of their giving. Whereas the people think in terms of giving God things, to a greater or lesser degree, Micah recalls them to the quintessence of living in covenant relationship.

In addition to doing justice, they are not just to show mercy, but to love showing it. They are to give others the same measure of mercy they want to receive from God. They are also admonished to walk humbly before the Lord. It is almost as if God is calling them to remember who God is. The text suggests that if you keep in mind who the Lord is and your relationship to Him, you will be compelled to walk humbly before him. With this denunciation, God has proven His case before the court. Israel is afflicted, but it is not because of the neglect or disregard of God. Their own sin brought their affliction

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>113</sup> Micah 6:6-7 NIV

upon them. In addition, what God required of them was not mysterious or too difficult; they simply did not do it.

Marrs notes that doing justice is actualizing the will of God in all facets of one's daily life, that is, "to act, not according to personal advantage or comfort, but according to God's will."<sup>114</sup> It involves feeling a sense of solidarity or community with the weak and disenfranchised. To walk humbly is to carefully attend to the will and way of God, rather than to go presumptuously on one's own way. In a real sense, this passage is about sacrifice, but sacrifice from a totally different perspective from that of Micah's audience. Micah's audience wanted to offer God segments from a compartmentalized life; God wants the totality of the life itself. God desires not a sacrifice of things, but a sacrifice of the self. This is both corporate and personal.

The good that Yahweh seeks in every person among his people is rotted in making justice and steadfast love the controlling interests in all of life, thereby fostering a relationship with Yahweh that is characterized by paying careful and judicious attention to honoring his claim on all life. This is the offering Yahweh accepts.<sup>115</sup>

The oracles of Micah reflect the importance and impact of ethics upon varied socioeconomic groups during the closing days of the eighth century. Because of the diverse social settings of the people, Micah found himself proclaiming both judgment and grace. To the powerful and self-confident, Micah could proclaim only judgment. Their confidence was misplaced; their actions were misguided. Apparently the rich and powerful of Micah's day saw no injustice in initiating and implementing policies

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<sup>114</sup> Marrs, "Prophetic Faith," 312.

<sup>115</sup> A. Vanlier Hunter, *Seek the Lord: A Study of the Meaning and Function of the Exhortations in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Zephaniah* (Baltimore: St. Mary's, 1982) 252.

detrimental to the poor and oppressed within society. The ancient Israelite community struggled among themselves because some of their members got caught in the endless web of greed, violence, and the abuse of power that caused a myriad of injustices, leaving the most vulnerable with few alternatives except to succumb to those more powerful than themselves. It is clear that the root cause of injustice within the Israelite community was the loss of a proper perspective on relationships, both with God and with one another.

The researcher's contention is that since the church has lost its way, it needs to once again recover our prophetic witness. In both the Lukan narrative as well as the Micah text, the emphasis is placed on the neglect to do justice; the neglect of embracing true community. Like the Pharisees, the church knows the right words but their own words are getting in the way. Both texts also emphasize the need to live humbly in relationship with one another and with God. The people of God must value what God values, above and beyond their own personalized creeds or doctrinal statements. The Lord considers holy and righteous those who pave the way for righteousness and justice to be expressed on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed. With such great admonitions coming Jesus and Lord God, respectively, it makes sense for the modern church to adopt these same views that, as John Wesley notes, there is no holiness except social holiness.

Justice and prophetic engagement are highlighted throughout the pages of Scripture. In fact, a major theme in both the Old and New Testaments is that God demands justice. Our challenge as God's redeemed is to engage the world with both evangelistic and social ministry. These two streams must never be divided. Unfortunately, however, much of Christendom can be neatly divided into two separate

categories: those who stress our vertical responsibility to God as individuals and those who stress our horizontal responsibilities to God's people as a community of believers.

The God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New Testament as portrayed in the biblical stories in this chapter are actively engaged in the work of justice in and through the situations, circumstances, and people of the day. This work of justice and divine engagement in it continues in and through today's situations, circumstances, and people as well. Justice rooted in love and exercised on behalf of another, reaches its depth and fullness when it is expressed as compassion, for compassion is not only the beginning and the end of justice, it is also the heart of justice.

### *Historical Foundations*

A historical survey of John Wesley, the beginnings of Methodism, and the societal changes and events which occasioned the need for social justice and ministry to the poor are critical for this study. Advancement in thought and context, as well as how to best deal with poverty throughout England in the eighteenth century, will be discussed in this section. Wesley and the Methodist's response to the same will also be covered.

To best understand John Wesley, one must take a look at his history, beginning with his family. Samuel Wesley and Susanna Annesley Wesley chose to be faithful members of the Church of England. The couple had nineteen children, John being the fifteenth and Charles the eighteenth.<sup>116</sup> The Wesley's upright English ancestors passed to them a living legacy of their love of the Bible and their adherence to Church of England tradition. This was expressed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, homilies, and doctrinal

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<sup>116</sup> Henry Carter, *The Methodist Heritage*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 5

articles and creeds.<sup>117</sup> The way of life at Epworth had a lasting influence upon the lives of John and Charles Wesley.

Indeed, reverence of Scripture had family history. One grandfather, Samuel Annesley, became the leader of the London Dissenters and a noted expositor of the Bible.<sup>118</sup> Samuel Wesley wrote *Life of Christ, The History of the Old and New Testament in Verse*, and was completing a Latin work on Job at the time of his death.<sup>119</sup> One sees this influence in John and Charles; reading their writings is like reading the Biblical text. It is clear these men were well-acquainted with the Bible and its teachings. John wrote in the preface to his standard sermons:

I want to know one thing-the way to heaven. I want to know how to land safely on that happy shore...God himself has descended to teach the way; it is for this very purpose that Christ came from heaven. He had written the way in a book. O, give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it, and it contains knowledge enough for me!<sup>120</sup>

The Church of England tradition was also cherished by the Wesley family. Susanna wrote manuals of biblical instruction and an exposition of the Apostles' Creed for her children.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, *The Book of Common Prayer* had a major role in shaping the spiritual understanding of the Wesley children. It served as a companion to the Bible, grounding them in the doctrine and history of the Church, as well as the teaching of the reformers. Home schooling and religious instruction were provided from a very early age.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>120</sup> Kenneth Cain Kinghorn, *John Wesley on Christian Beliefs: The Standard Sermons in Modern English* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) vol. 1, 1-20, 30.

<sup>121</sup> Carter, *The Methodist Heritage*, 14.

“Our children were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord’s Prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bedtime constantly; to which, as they got bigger, were added a short prayer for their parents and some collects, a short catechism, and some portion of Scripture, as their memories could bear,” Susanna wrote.<sup>122</sup> It is noteworthy that the sons went on to win high distinctions at famous public schools Westminster, Charterhouse, and Oxford. This legacy of faith would propel John and Charles toward religious study and practice and toward a heart-hunger for favor with God that would ultimately lead them to saving faith.

In 1725, John reported, “When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into holy orders.”<sup>123</sup> This path led John to spiritual discoveries in the literature of Christian writers, including Bishop Jeremy Taylor and William Law from the Church of England; and Thomas Kempis from the Catholic past.<sup>124</sup> The writings of these men and others challenged and shaped the thinking of John and, no doubt, Charles Wesley.

In early 1729, a number of influences converged in John’s life which convinced him “not only to read, but to study the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion.”<sup>125</sup> At this time Wesley established clearly in his mind the aim of Christianity: holiness of heart and life, holiness capable of changing the world.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 46-48.

<sup>125</sup> John Wesley, “Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), vol. 11, para. 5.

The question of how holiness of heart and life comes about in an individual and in the world, however, eluded Wesley at this early stage in his theological understanding.<sup>126</sup>

Another providential intervention leading the two Wesley brothers toward the spiritual peace they desired took place on their journey to America. The Wesley brothers went to Georgia as ordained clergymen of the Church of England. John was ordained priest in 1728 a few days before embarking for America.<sup>127</sup> In October 1735, the brothers sailed for the colony of Georgia, with Charles to serve as Secretary to Oglethorpe the Governor, John to be a missionary to the Indians and to act as minister to the Anglican Church in Savannah. It was on this voyage that they were drawn into fellowship with a group of Moravian refugees whose piety and sincerity were to point for them the way to saving faith.<sup>128</sup>

It was Peter Bohler, the Moravian, who brought the Wesley's to the verge of the great discovery.<sup>129</sup> This initial contact forged a link to the Moravian faith for Wesley that would undergird much of his thought in later writings. Back in England, in February 1738, John had a providential meeting with Peter Bohler, Schullius Richter, and Wensel Neisser, who had just arrived from Germany. He helped them secure a place to stay and spent much time in their company. What John saw in the lives of these Moravians caused him to doubt his own worthiness to preach the Gospel. Bohler encouraged John not to give up his calling, but instead to, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Carter, *The Methodist Heritage*, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 25.

have, you will preach faith.”<sup>130</sup> Ultimately, it was the voice of the great reformer Martin Luther that reached across the centuries and spoke first to Charles, then to John, enabling them both to find the faith they would preach for the remainder of their lives in word, song, and deed.

In May 1738, both John and Charles were wrestling within and without for an assurance of their salvation. The prevenient grace, the grace that goes before conversion, that John would identify by name in later teachings was pressing upon them. Charles was not only distressed of mind, but sick in body. He was lodging in London at the home of a friend, John Bray.<sup>131</sup> Bray’s home was a place where seekers like Charles came to pray, converse, and read religious literature. It was here that Charles encountered Martin Luther’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians.<sup>132</sup> He read:

Who is this “me”? Even I, wretched and damnable sinner, so dearly beloved of the Son of God, that he gave himself for me. If I, then, through works or merits could have loved the Son of God, and so come unto him, what needed he to deliver himself for me?...But because there was no other price either in heaven or on earth, but Christ the Son of God, therefore it was most necessary that he should be delivered for me. Moreover, this he did of inestimable love: for Paul saith, “which loved me”...Read therefore with great vehemency these words, “me” and “for me,” and so inwardly practice with thyself, that thou, with a sure faith, mayst conceive and print this “me” in thy heart, and apply it unto thyself, not doubting but thou art the number of those to whom this “me” belongeth.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Carter, *The Methodist Heritage*, 43.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>132</sup> Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



On Whitsunday, May 21, Charles received the assurance of salvation and was physically healed at the same time. He rejoiced, “I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.”<sup>134</sup>

When John heard of Charles’s experience, he wrote: “I received the surprising news that my brother had found rest to his soul. His bodily strength returned also from that hour. ‘Who is so great a God as our God?’”<sup>135</sup> But for himself, in a letter to a friend written at the same time, he could but say: “All my works, my righteousness, my prayers, need atonement for themselves. So that my mouth is stopped. I have nothing to plead. God is holy, I am unholy... Yet I hear a voice (and is it not the voice of God) saying ‘Believe, and thou shalt be saved.’”<sup>136</sup>

On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, John began his day with the reading of scripture in the early morning hours. He read 2 Peter 1:4, “There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.” In the afternoon he attended St. Paul’s and found in the anthem the same message of promise as he had found in the morning’s Scripture. That evening, John’s experience culminated at a meeting on Aldersgate Street. John wrote these words, familiar to many, in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away “my” sins, even “mine,” and saved “me” from the law of sin and death.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Carter, *The Methodist Heritage*, 60.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 64.

Charles Wesley recounted the end to this memorable day: “Toward ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends, and declared, ‘I believe.’ We sang the hymn with great joy, and parted with prayer.”<sup>138</sup>

Prior to their personal, life changing conversions, John and Charles Wesley had endeavored to live holy lives, to do good works, and to enlist others to join them. The Holy Club at Oxford was established by Charles and later led by John prior to their salvation by faith experience. The derisive name Methodist was first applied to Charles and his Oxford friends, indicating the studious and devotional rule of life which they followed. Their goals were to converse with young students, visit the prisons, instruct some poor families, and take care of a school and a parish workhouse.<sup>139</sup> After their personal encounters with Christ, the Gospel and social witness of the Wesley’s took on a new dimension. With that experience came the understanding that holiness cannot be realized apart from saving faith and works of mercy. It would be these works of mercy that Wesley would later use to form the building blocks of the polity and theology of the Methodist church.

Now, having laid down this theological backdrop to the social witness, we shift gears to highlight prominent, concrete ways that John Wesley and the early English and American Methodists’ faith expressed love for their neighbor and engaged prophetically with society. Are these the only ways Methodists demonstrated love and concern? By no means. Wesley addressed tracts, wrote letters, and instituted rules in the societies that expressed love and concern toward ills that straddle the line between the personal and

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<sup>138</sup> Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters*, 18.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

social, such as the use and abuse of spirituous liquor, the avoidance of paying tax on goods, luxurious dressing, the use of money, prostitution, visiting the sick, medical illnesses, and the revolutionary war. Nonetheless, the following are prominent illustrations of how Wesley was constrained by the love of God to lead the Methodists in outward, good works.

Wesley's love for the poor was a common denominator by which many of his concerns are divisible. There was definite reason to love the poor. In his day, English society was structured like a socioeconomic pyramid. With vast distinctions between rich and poor, there were a few at the top and many at the bottom. Poor laborers received roughly ten pounds a year in wages. The prime minister spent fifteen pounds a night just for candles to light his home.<sup>140</sup> Laboring people's strength was sapped for little reward and little thanks. Everyone below the income of a skilled craftsman was undernourished. Women and children were particularly vulnerable. To the bulk of the population, toil, deprivation, uncertainty, and suffering were constant daily facts.<sup>141</sup> When John Wesley visited on his preaching rounds, he found people he described as "half starved with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But not one of them unemployed."<sup>142</sup>

Adding to the fact of his personal experience with his family's chronic indebtedness, Wesley's sensitivity to the plight of the poor was stimulated as an Oxford student. He realized he was not able to help a thinly clad woman in winter because he had spent money decorating his rooms. Later, he regulated Methodist Society life with the

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<sup>140</sup> Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 15.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

poor in mind. In 1741, one of the society rules was that the class leaders take an offering each week toward the relief of the poor.<sup>143</sup> Society members were urged to bring clothes and a weekly penny for needy Methodists. A bronze slot was put into Bristol's New Room chapel door with these words, "Give to ye poor. Happy is he that hath mercy on the poor."

Wesley also directed society lifestyle in accordance with the deprivation of the poor. He said society members should avoid pearls, gold and costly apparel because the "more you lay out on your own apparel, the less you have to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to lodge the strangers, to relieve those that are sick and in prison..."<sup>144</sup> Though they did not endure, he built poorhouses for destitute widows and children.

While he went begging for the poor more than once, his begging at age eighty-two in ankle-deep snow in London for five consecutive days at Christmastime is striking.<sup>145</sup> Wesley's counsel to Methodists is to be remembered: "Put yourself in the place of any poor man, and deal with him as you would God should deal with you."<sup>146</sup> The symbiotic relationship between the personal concern for the soul and social mercy for the body was evident in his ministry to the poor. With penetrating insight, he noted the hope of saving the souls of the poor from death was one of the strongest incentives to all acts of bodily mercy.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>145</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London; Epworth Press, 1938), 129.

<sup>146</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 363.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 364.

Loving one's neighbor and outward holiness also entailed doing what Jesus said to do, to visit those in prison. In the eighteenth century, prison was an extremely harsh reality. Laws were not very discriminating. One could be executed for murder as well as for stealing handkerchiefs. Nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Hardy was sentenced to hang for stealing goods worth fifty dollars! At the last moment, she got a reprieve. Aiming simply to confine people, many prisons were small and overcrowded. They could be damp and cold. Half of the prison population was debtors, like John Wesley's father. When William Smith observed occupants in 1776, he saw them scantily clad in a "few filthy rags almost alive with vermin, their bodies rotting with distemper and covered with itch, scorbutic and venereal ulcers."<sup>148</sup>

Wesley occasionally visited the jails in Oxford, London, Bristol, and elsewhere. He sometimes preached, read the Bible, gave communion, prayed with the prisoners, provided food and clothing, and saw prisoners find forgiveness in Jesus Christ.<sup>149</sup> In fact, the first person to which he records having offered salvation by faith alone was an Oxford prisoner named Clifford who was under the sentence of death.<sup>150</sup> In 1753, he visited Marshalsea Prison. He called the prison "a bursary of all manner of wickedness. Oh shame to man that there should be such a place, such a picture of hell upon the earth!" He declaimed it a shame that a country where Christianity had been established should need any prison at all.<sup>151</sup> In 1759, the British were holding eleven hundred French

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>149</sup> Frank Baker, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 255.

<sup>150</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, 42.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 52.

prisoners in Knowle, just a mile from Bristol. John Wesley went to see them. He was much affected by the scandalous lack of humane treatment. He preached that evening on, “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger.” He got immediate contributions in which cloth was purchased and clothing made. These were distributed to the neediest prisoners. Though the context is unclear, the inference from Wesley’s journal is that his call initiated the Corporation of Bristol and others from across the kingdom to send bedding and other necessities of life to the prisoners.<sup>152</sup>

Other Methodists who made visiting the prison a regular ministry modeled Wesley’s example. Sarah Peters became a faithful prison visitor. John Wesley said it was her “peculiar gift, and her continual care, to seek and save that which was lost.”<sup>153</sup> She went continually to Newgate, sometimes alone, to visit all that were condemned to death in their cells. She exhorted from Scripture, prayed with them and found increasing thirst for God. A wayward Methodist named John Lancaster had stolen property from City Road Chapel. He was arrested, tried, and condemned to death. Believing he did not deserve death, Sarah sought a pardon for him, to no avail. She was undeterred by a severe outbreak of dangerous, contagious fever in London’s Newgate prison. Just a few days before John Lancaster’s hanging, she saw a change in him. In the meantime, she became gravely ill, probably jail fever, and died just ten days later.<sup>154</sup> One sees in Sarah Peters and her mentor the twinning of personal and social concern for both prisoners’ bodies and souls.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 381-82.

In his vigorous commitment to experiential, personal knowledge of Jesus Christ and the love of God and neighbor, Wesley believed that the restoration of the image of God in the believer encompassed bringing the passions and intellect into conformity to Christ. He took a keen interest in education, but not just any education would do. Plato and Socrates' only goal in educating was teaching people how to think and judge and act accordingly. For Wesley, Christian education's only goal was to teach how to think and judge and act according to the rule of Christianity. It helped people discover the false judgments of the mind and subdue every wrong passion.<sup>155</sup>

In promoting the need for educating the Christian mind and will, Wesley gave incentive for education to the laboring class. The inspiration to know the mind of Christ in Holy Scripture gave motivation to read.<sup>156</sup> In Britain, though most males of the middle class could read, just more than half of the male laboring population was literate.<sup>157</sup> Early Methodist preachers like ironworker Francis Asbury came mainly from trades. Some said they did not like to read, or reading the Bible was all the reading they needed to do. Wesley countered them by saying, "Reading Christians will be knowing Christians."<sup>158</sup> One needed to read beyond the Bible to avoid being dull and one dimensional. So, he provided the preaching houses with a fifty-volume library called the Christian Library. Augmenting the reading of Scripture, the Christian Library contained the best works of divinity simplified for his uneducated followers.

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<sup>155</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Works*, 349.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

Wesley also established and oversaw four Kingswood schools for boys and girls; it was a lifetime labor of love. He originally designed the schools for the general Christian public; they were to be Christian schools free of the dubious educational methods, religious, and moral atmosphere of the great schools. The school was designed to “train up children...in every branch of useful learning:” with hopes they would be fit with the qualifications for the work of ministry. He sought to form the children’s minds and wills, through God’s help, to wisdom and holiness.<sup>159</sup> The concern for educating young minds to wisdom and holiness along the Kingwood model was emulated by the American Methodists. On the cusp of the Christmas Conference of 1784, which formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, a project for a Methodist college was already being broached and materials were to be collected.<sup>160</sup> Methodist education began with Cokesbury in Maryland, with proposals following for other schools in Georgia, North Carolina, and Kentucky.<sup>161</sup> Educating people for the need for Christian education was itself a hurdle. Asbury lamented that “people in general, care too little for the education of their children.”<sup>162</sup> Methodist concern for bringing wills and minds into conformity to Christ through Christian education was as real as the legacy of many Methodist-based colleges and national universities such as Southern California, Syracuse, Emory, and Duke.

Love for others who were the work of the Creator’s hands and the purchase of the Son’s blood was motivation enough for John Wesley to commend liberty for all and to

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<sup>159</sup> Porter, *English Society*, 167.

<sup>160</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 355.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



condemn black slavery.<sup>163</sup> Black slavery was a national scourge which Wesley spoke against locally and as a prominent national leader. Likewise, American Methodist leaders Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury echoed his sentiment in appealing for action against slavery in America. Wesley encountered slavery as a missionary in Georgia. He firmly supported the administrator James Oglethorpe and the Georgia colony trustees in their policy to outlaw the slave trade.<sup>164</sup> Wesley also provided some of the slaves with Christian instruction.<sup>165</sup>

During the eighteenth century, the slave trade was turning handsome profits. The triangle of England, West Africa, and the West Indies and America was thriving off of it. Ships sailed from Liverpool and Bristol (up to thirty thousand slaves a year) to West Africa to capture the Africans.<sup>166</sup> They were then transported to the Caribbean and America to work the sugar and cotton plantations. Sugar and cotton were sold in return.

In 1774, John Wesley wrote a powerful tract against slavery. He called slavery a detestable business procured by a deliberate series of more complicated villainy (of fraud, robbery, and murder) than was ever practiced by the Mahomeatans or Pagans. Liberty was the right of every human person who breathes the air. No human law can deprive one of this right.<sup>167</sup> To a Bristol “new room,” full of high and low, rich and poor, he preached on slavery. The next day was set apart for fasting and prayer that “God would remember

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<sup>163</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 59.

<sup>164</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, 244.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>166</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 356.

<sup>167</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 78.

those poor outcasts of men.”<sup>168</sup> Moved by reading the life of the black slave Gustavus Vassa, Wesley, in what was likely his last letter, wrote encouragement to House of Commons representative William Wilberforce in his campaign to eradicate slavery in England. He urged him to, “Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even the American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”<sup>169</sup>

American Methodists were in lockstep with their English brethren. They opposed slavery through conference action and preaching, and by appeal to government leaders. In 1780, a conference measure was passed to require preachers holding slaves to promise to set them free. Slavery was condemned as against the laws of God, humankind, and nature. This was reiterated in the conference of 1783.<sup>170</sup> The 1784 conference stated that members who continued to hold slaves after having been warned against it would be expelled.<sup>171</sup> In 1785, the conference drafted a petition to the General Assembly of North Carolina to encourage persons to emancipate their slaves. Asbury visited with the governor and received his backing.<sup>172</sup>

Methodist preachers, with few exceptions, were emancipationists and preached courageously against slavery. They, including Thomas Coke, were threatened, even mobbed, for their stance. Coke and Asbury made an appointment with President George Washington to appeal to him to oppose slavery. After dining with the President at Mt.

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<sup>168</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, 359.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>170</sup> Stevens, *History*, 77.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

Vernon, they met with him in private to present a petition for the emancipation of blacks. Agreeing with their sentiments but refusing to sign it, he said he would support an assembly measure to that effect.<sup>173</sup> Notwithstanding these strongly held views, and in what is now seen as a tragic move, Asbury, trying to hold the conference together, compromised with slavery proponents that same year allowing the conference to suspend its former rules against slavery.<sup>174</sup>

John Wesley and the Methodists are exemplary in Christian history as authentic proponents of evangelical faith and social love, justification by faith and good works, inward and outward religion, the personal and the social. Through their own personal experience of the love of God and the love of humankind in justification and sanctification, they offered to any who would receive the possibility of full redemption from ills of soul and body. Holding together both personal pardon and social love, the higher goal of the salvation of souls was the deepest motivation for social mercies of bodies. Wesley is a true model of doing social justice and ministry to the poor while remaining true to the great commission of Christ. The two are not divorced, nor are they diametrically opposed. They are two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>174</sup> Frederick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 186.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Project Design**

Nearly five years ago, the researcher was appointed as senior pastor of St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The researcher was both the youngest and first single pastor appointed to the congregation in Detroit, Michigan. The church is located in a once prosperous area of Detroit's North-end neighborhood. The researcher came to the congregation after serving three former congregations as pastor and two as associate minister in the states of Illinois and Michigan. He came to the church after experiencing seasons of growth and learning in former contexts. These seasons were preparing him for the great task he would encounter at this historic congregation.

The researcher learned that the St. John's C.M.E. Church was in a state of ministry complacency. The congregation's reputation in the community was not favorable. In fact, the current set of assumptions about what constitutes membership at the St. John's C.M.E. Church will forever work against any sincere effort to engage a majority of members in the work of justice in the city of Detroit. As a result, the researcher came to the conclusion that part of the lack of growth and ministry complacency was due to a lack of intentional relationship with the community. There was a level of comfort in the congregation was not healthy in terms of ministry activity. There was also an active disconnect between the creeds and doctrine of the church versus the

actual praxis of the congregation. The researcher/pastor was left with a challenge, a problem of how to move, as interpreter of the faith and member of the faith community, a stagnant congregation to one of interested and active community participants. To be an authentic and transforming community, St. John's must move from simply gathering to being sent.

The researcher's history is one that includes the transformative power of homiletic delivery as a major theme. His history also includes the appreciation of Methodist social ethics and theology as useful for the transformation of communities. As such, this project focuses on "Prophetic Preaching and Methodist Social Theology as the Framework for Developing Effective Social Justice Ministry." The context was the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Detroit, Michigan. The pastor sought to meet the needs of the church's community by altering the thinking and subsequent behavior of the church. He sought to do so with an understanding that this was both biblical and mandated by Christ. Ray S. Anderson enhances this particular point of understanding as he notes:

The church finds its true ministry in the upholding, healing and transformation of the humanity of others as already grasped and reconciled to God through the incarnation, atoning life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the authentic praxis of Christ's ministry through his humanity – this is Christopraxis. The church cannot be truly human when it denies and dehumanizes the humanity of others.<sup>175</sup>

The sermons preached and correlating discussions sought to bring about an awareness of the plight of the least of these in the community which envelopes the church.

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<sup>175</sup> Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 180.

The primary engaging tool for this project is the sermon. The belief is that the sermon can evoke positive and salvific change in the life of the believer. Traditionally, the goal of preaching is to stir the soul of the listener in the hopes of producing salvific effects, such as the accepting of Christ as savior or a change in the way one thinks about themselves in the world or community. The sermons preached in this project, and the accompanying discussions, are for the latter effect. Not only does the researcher desire change inwardly for the purposes of spiritual catharsis, but this change also must be accompanied by and with a desire to act upon that which has been learned.

The common theme in the sermons preached is the implicit or explicit Wesleyan and biblical emphasis on justice. This includes the mention of the following features of Methodist social ethics: strong emphasis on biblical content, holistic in nature (concerned with the whole person), transformational, intentional, ministry and love as an extension of God's mercy and grace in the world, appropriate for all contexts.

John W. Creswell, in his text *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, discusses the three methods of research designs and the value and goals of each method. In defining and outlining each method, he cautions the researcher, "Decisions about choice of a design are further influenced by the research problem or issue being studied, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the audience for whom the researcher writes."<sup>176</sup> Thus, for the purposes of this project, this researcher has chosen the qualitative research method.

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<sup>176</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009), 20.

The researcher hypothesizes that congregants would respond favorably to hearing sermons and be compelled to develop a social justice ministry and to engage society on an intentional level.

The purpose of this study was to interpret and initiate the fundamentals of transformative Methodist social theology through the medium of prophetic preaching for the goal of designing an intentional social justice ministry in the context of the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Detroit, Michigan. A large portion of this study sought to understand the religious, denominational, and/or social factors that may have contributed to the lack of social justice ministries in the ministry paradigm at the church.

For the purposes of this study, the research framework employed will be that of triangulation. The methods are a pre and post survey, individual interviews, after journaling. The pre-surveys employed gauged the following: the responder's views toward social justice, a survey of the church's history of social interaction, a synopsis of their own involvement with social justice ministry activity, etc. The post surveys measured the same questions following the sermons. The individual interviews were meant to obtain a general understanding of the participants' views toward the church's mission, etc. The after sermon surveys asked specific questions about what was obtained from sermons and did they provoke an interest toward the development of social justice ministry.

The research questions for the project are as follows: (a) How does a diverse sampling of St. John's C.M.E. Church members describe their feelings about social justice as a ministry? (b) How do members of St. John's C.M.E. Church describe their reactions to prophetic sermons related to Methodist fundamentals about social justice? (c)

How do these sermons affect their desires to develop a social justice ministry at St. John's C.M.E. Church? (d) How is it that social mission ever ceased to be an integral part of the life of the community of St. John's C.M.E. Church?

The participants are eight persons from the congregation of St. John's Church. The participants were chosen based on their willingness to be included in a sample of the congregation. To diversify or stratify the sample, the researcher chose four men and four women. There is one of each gender based on the following age categories: 13-19, 20-35, 36-59, 60 and over. By using this age categorization, the data collected will reflect the opinions and attitudes of a wide range of personalities and generations. It also utilizes a sample that is in the same proportion to the church population itself.

The sample will be measured based on their reactions to the sermons using a response survey questionnaire asking questions such as: Based on this sermon, how likely are you to participate in the development of a social justice ministry? (Very Likely, Somewhat Likely, Neither Likely nor Unlikely, Somewhat Unlikely, Very Unlikely). The researcher will measure the respondents' attitudes, beliefs and values toward social justice involvement and ministry implementation.

The instrumentation utilized is prophetic sermons that have the similar theme of Methodist social theology and ethics. The common attributes of Methodist social theology in these messages include: a holistic approach to addressing the needs of people; addressing relevant, contextual issues; justice as an extension of God's mercy and grace; the salvation of the individual; and the transformation of structures into the will of God.

At the end of the project each person within the group submitted their journals as well as any additional material they, as a group, thought was necessary. The researcher



compiled all the material that was received and made general and specific observations. The researcher looked for themes by observing and reviewing the compiled information. These observations were in regards to the sermons that were preached, the challenge of applying what was heard, and the overall change in thinking that was taking place. As noted before, the research method that was used to test the treatment hypothesis was that of a qualitative research design.

The time period for the development of sermons, the preaching of those sermons and the observations and collection of data occurred from November 5, 2012 through January 12, 2013. Each Thursday night for at least one hour, the participants and researcher met at the St. John's Church to discuss the sermons and the impact the sermons had on their overall understanding of social justice. The researcher and the participants could not meet for discussion on four occasions because of weather and the researcher's travel schedule, but the data was collected the following week through the notes and journals, and discussion then took place.

The researcher selected eight context associates. Each context associate signed a Letter of Agreement to participate in the project. The participants were representative of the congregation consisting of both male and female members. The youngest group member was 22 years old and the oldest, 72 years old. Each person within the group was a regular member of the church, agreed to participate in the study, but also acknowledged that he or she had not given much thought to the development of a social justice or community ministry. One participant acknowledged that he had once been a community activist, of sorts, working to ensure rights for local union members. Another mentioned that she worked for the dean of students at a local college.

The context associates were a smaller congregation within Shiloh Baptist Church and they represented the congregation in this project. The researcher used the participants in several different capacities. First, pre-interviews were administered to each context associate. The researcher used the group process for the purpose of developing sermon topics, expounding on different biblical texts, interviews and in-depth discussions following the sermons. The researcher also asked all context associates to keep a journal and take part in peer sessions. They assisted the researcher by being transparent and honest throughout the entire process. The researcher documented the participant's observations as they related their attitudes and beliefs based on the preaching of prophetic sermons. The researcher also utilized a journal and evaluated the effect the sermons had on him as they were developed and delivered. The researcher and the participants worked jointly on developing a ministry that served to address intentionally the needs of the community. The field of study or participant observation took place at the St. John's C.M.E. Church.

The researcher had his first meeting with the project participants on November 1, 2012 at St. John's Church. The meeting was to discuss the project's design and their participation. Additionally, each participant learned, in detail, the purpose of the project. A questionnaire was presented to the project participants asking them for their feedback as well as asking them to provide topics that pertained to social justice and community engagement.

The first of four sermons developed was preached on Sunday, November 18, 2012. The researcher preached four total prophetic sermons and conducted a group discussion with the context associates following the sermon to measure the impact of

those sermons on the life of the participants. A discussion with a question and answer period was held within the group about the sermon. Participants were then asked what impact the sermon had on them individually and as a group. The goal was to measure the effectiveness and the impact these sermons had on them individually as well as collectively. Upon preaching prophetic sermons to the St. John's C.M.E. Church the researcher gathered all necessary information and documented his findings in a narrative, descriptive form and concluded whether preaching prophetic sermons to the congregation and participants had any impact and, if so, to what extent.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FIELD EXPERIENCE**

This project is “Prophetic Preaching and Methodist Social Theology as the Framework for Developing Effective Social Justice Ministry.” The purpose of this project was to preach sermons that had a strong Wesleyan social theology and prophetic engagement emphasis and to measure the impact of such sermons by determining how congregants were influenced and motivated to develop begin a social justice ministry in the context of St. John’s Church. The primary question being dealt with is the ability of the sermon, the proclaimed word of God, to be able to shift people’s thinking and if that shift has the ability to lead to effective ministry development. The researcher’s hypothesis was that congregants would respond favorably to hearing sermons and be moved to develop a social justice ministry and to engage society on an intentional level.

The researcher claims that preaching was the very tool Jesus used, as well as his disciples and apostles, and the early church to bring attention to the societal structures that hurt and unfairly targets the marginalized. The researcher further contends that social justice is integral to the mission of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament speaks about justice at length. Isaiah speaks of the mandate for justice in this way, “Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.”<sup>177</sup> Again, the emphasis is on those who are often overlooked in society. Furthermore, the ministry of John Wesley provides a helpful model for prophetic engagement and social justice as he ensured that the early Methodists were people of both love and action. They had a particular concern for the poor, imprisoned and were among the first to take a public stand against slavery.

The objective of this project was to assess and determine the impact preaching prophetic Wesleyan sermons had, whether positive or negative, on the lives of the parishioners of St. John’s Church; the positive impact would be if they were moved to develop a ministry that resembled the sermons that were preached.

The issues examined were whether or not a series of sermons could be efficacious to the development of ministry. The pastor of the St. John’s Church was faced with a great, historic congregation that had seemingly lost its way. This was evident in the fact that the community which housed the church was broken, including high crime rates, poverty, little to no access to healthy food, for some, and no food at all, for others. This was the reality yet there were no intentional ministries in the church to deal with the circumstances. The pastor, as the interpreter of the faith, recognized that this was not the ministry of Jesus Christ. As such, he desired to compel the congregation to move from complacency and blindness and to introduce a new set of lenses. Lenses that would show the St. John’s Church that ministry in and of itself, is not a difficult thing. Instead, just as Wesley demonstrates, it’s about recognizing your context, noticing what’s wrong, and then acting upon it. Moreover, when dealing with justice issues, it must be recognized that the call to charity and justice is integral, not optional, to our faith. That is to say that

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<sup>177</sup> Isaiah 1:17 NRSV

God's gifts to be both rendered and received. The goal was to teach some, and remind others that the Gospel compels us, our Discipline implores us, and our own nature leads us to an ever widening relationship with each other, our community, our nation, our church, and our world. As Wesley taught, "there is no religion but social religion."<sup>178</sup>

The researcher's goal was to conduct pre and post-interviews as well as surveys and journals from the participants. This took place at the very first meeting where the purpose was to provide introductions and to allow members to share their views on justice and community engagement in a setting that gave them the freedom to discuss the same. The pre and post questions were simply used to gather information about the group members. After reading the pre-questions from each other group members, the researcher then reviewed and assessed them to discover where each member was theologically and evangelically. The researcher discovered that the top five reasons why the participants had never considered a social justice ministry in the church are as follows: (1) lack of church teaching/preaching on justice, (2) justice is too political, (3) there will always be injustice in the world, so "what's the point," (4) a natural discomfort interacting with people, (5) no appropriate definition for justice. The researcher acknowledged these views as genuine. He also crafted sermons and discussions around these views, which were shared by a majority of the participants.

The discussion on the lack of church teaching/preaching on justice was particularly telling. Most participants had been members of St. John's Church their entire lives and did not actively recall sermons or teaching series on the topic of justice or community engagement. This let the researcher know that, although he had, in fact,

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<sup>178</sup> Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, 78.

preached prophetic justice sermons over the course of his four year tenure at the church, perhaps the language or emphasis in such sermons should be altered or enhanced so that the congregation is clearer on the sermon's topic, both for justice as well as more general sermons. Perhaps more real-world examples or illustrations might be needed to improve the recollection of such prophetic sermons. One participant suggested that the researcher also include space in the bulletin for sermon notes or questions.

The subsequent sessions dealt with the views of the group members but also included some facts about their community and some writings from John Wesley and Methodist discipline, particularly those sections which dealt directly with social views, namely the "Social Creed" of the Methodist Church. This creed states, in part, "We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the glory of God and the good of themselves and others and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress."<sup>179</sup> The researcher stressed that if we embrace these concepts in our doctrine but do not practice them, there is a hypocritical disconnect. Although there was general agreement with the need to do something, some group members differed on what that something was and whether or not it was the local church's responsibility to act, or if that should be left to the general church or a government/church collaborative.

### **Sermon: "The Bad Notes of Life"**

The first sermon and session was "The Bad Notes of Life (see Appendix A). After the sermon was preached, three people gave their lives to Christ. At the midweek group

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<sup>179</sup> C.M.E. Church, *Discipline*, 21.

session, the researcher asked the group what effects the sermon had on their understanding of justice or self. The researcher also asked what the major themes and focus in the sermon were.

One of the female members answered the first question by noting that life will not always be what we desire it to be, but that should not slow our movement toward becoming more faithful to God. Another participant noted that a major theme in the sermon was about not giving up in spite of difficult odds. All agreed that the sermon was more about self-determination in the face of the interruptions of life. In the sermon, there's a story of a man who experienced a major crisis in his own life after his business failed and he nearly went bankrupt. In spite of this let down, the man remained positive and faithful. One of the participants said this story resonated with them as they had years earlier lost his business. The researcher used this as a teaching moment by demonstrating there are perhaps hundreds, maybe thousands, of people in our church's zip code alone who have similar stories of let down after a major loss of this magnitude. It's not that those who experience such losses are any different than us, but they are the people we are called to minister to. In fact, sometimes those we offer social justice and prophetic redemption to are not poor or on the margins, at all. Jesus himself tried to bring redemption and salvation to the rich young ruler, but he walked away sad because giving up all that he had was too hard of a thing for him to do, "for he had many possessions."<sup>180</sup>

The participants also noted that the sermon was inspiring in that it motivated them to be faithfully aware that even though life has some bad notes, you are to keep on singing in spite of who else may be out of tune. This is a prophetic reality that speaks to

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<sup>180</sup> Mark 10:17-27 NRSV



those who have been rejected, let down, forgotten and sometimes abandoned. We have all shared these feelings, but being able to sing even when life itself is off-key is a great revelation and the beginning of wholeness, both for us and those we should minister to. In this, we share corporately in the reality of courage and faith under pressure, as opposed to viewing ourselves as individuals traveling this walk of faith alone.

### **Sermon: “This Thing Called Peace”**

The second sermon and session was “This Thing Called Peace.” In this sermon, the researcher discussed the varying dimensions of the concept of peace. This sermon had an intentional advent theme. Some of the underlying questions posed in the sermon and asked in the discussion period were: What does peace look like to you? What would peace look like for your neighbor? Is peace a part of social justice? The responses in this discussion were quite interesting in that so many of the participants, by their own admission, had never had a meaningful discussion on the nature of peace.

One participant commented that peace is not something he views favorably. For him, peace is sometimes the easy way out. It doesn’t require action or meaningful behavior. Others disagreed and a few contended that peace means that we are all connected, somehow. As a result, peace means action in that there can be no peace until everyone has the right to it. Another commented that peace is really fullness. Fullness in one’s heart, body and spirit. It’s a sense of satisfaction, greatness and happiness in your life. A divine or blessed assurance.

The researcher used the feedback about peace to introduce a larger, more biblical discussion about the nature of peace and justice in the world. He introduced a new word for some, the concept of shalom. Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. But peace in the

bible is more than the negative absence of armed conflict or violence. Shalom denotes the positive presence of harmony and wholeness, of health and prosperity, of integration and balance. It is the state of soundness or flourishing in all dimensions of existence; be it our relationship with God, our relations with each other, our relationships with ourselves. Shalom is when everything is as it ought to be. In this sense, shalom encapsulates God's basic intention for humanity. It says that people ought to live in a condition of all rightness in every department of life.

Shalom thus combines in one concept the meaning of justice and peace. To know shalom requires the achievement of both justice and peace. They are inseparable ingredients of the same reality. On the one hand, there can be no peace without justice. A helpful scripture for this discussion was Isaiah 32:16-18:

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abides in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.<sup>181</sup>

On the other hand, justice cannot ultimately be established, most times as scripture suggests, by non-peaceful means. There is no justice in war. "They do not know how to do right," Amos contends, "those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds."<sup>182</sup> So oftentimes throughout history, true peace is created through non-peaceful means, which is a paradox. However, peace for others ultimately comes through action. This discussion of action for the benefit of peace for all, particularly those in your own sphere of influence, resonated richly with the participants. Whereas the first sermon gave a more individualistic perspective on prophetic engagement, the second session

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<sup>181</sup> Isaiah 32:16-18 NRSV

<sup>182</sup> Amos 3:10 NRSV

dealt with a more inclusive worldview on the nature of social justice. The hope of peace must be a fundamental reason for performing acts of social justice in the world.

### **Sermon: “Emmanuel: God With Us”**

The third session and sermon was “Emmanuel: God With Us.” This sermon was also an advent themed message. The chief questions asked were: What does God being with us mean for you? What does God being with us mean for our community? How does this message resonate with you as it relates to the overall theme of social justice? Again, the responses to these questions, and those that were birthed out of our deep discussion were quite revealing.

One of the respondents suggested that for God to be with us means that God is on our side. God is not just in the boat with us when the rain weather is fair, but God is also with us when the storms of life are raging. Another echoed this sentiment by noting that God’s nature is to be concerned with God’s creation. As such, it is impossible for God to abandon us during hard times, even though, at times, we feel that God has. Another noted that since God is with us and for us, the us is not just limited to those who have everything going well. But God is with and for those who are experiencing difficult times, too. It was this insight which led us to a larger discussion of being with and for others.

The researcher noted that Wesley suggested that we are to be extensions of God’s love and grace in the world. This is the essential nature of the Christian. Just as God acted out of love for the whole world, to bring them into right relationship with God and others,

we too act out of love because our faith demands it. Marquardt, in speaking of Wesley's notion of love of neighbor as an effect of God's love writes:

Wesley viewed the love of God as reciprocal and personal, and believed it to be necessary for the emergence and implementation of unselfish love. Equally necessary as a result of the love of God known and experienced in faith was active love of one's neighbor. Anyone renewed by God's love and given the gift of faith could not resist sharing the love he had received.<sup>183</sup>

Thus, there is both a responsibility and a divine call, in our Wesleyan tradition, to manifest love for others as a result of God's love toward us.

With this knowledge, the participants began to realize, by their own admission that our faith demands that we respond in love and kindness to the needs of those in our community. Not simply because it is in our denominational language and literature, but because it is the outgrowth of the love God has for us.

### **Sermon: "What Forgiveness Looks Like"**

The fourth sermon and session was "What Forgiveness Looks Like." The sermon itself centers on the extension of grace to those who so desperately need to know that their sins are forgiven. This led to a great conversation on the nature of grace, forgiveness and why each is important in the unfolding of social justice. The researcher began the discussion with several key questions: What is grace to you? What is forgiveness to you? Why would grace and/or forgiveness be important in the development of a social justice ministry? The ensuing responses were reflective of each participant's faith journey up to that point.

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<sup>183</sup> Marquardt, *Social Ethics*, 107.

Answering the question “what is grace,” one participant noted that grace is the ability to do presently what could not be done in the past. In asking him to speak further, the respondent noted that grace is a type of freedom extended to one who should be imprisoned. This was a helpful understanding. Another group cohort suggested that grace and forgiveness are inextricably linked. There is no forgiveness without grace and that there is no grace without forgiveness. In asking what this has to do with social justice, the group was not as vocal, initially. Eventually, one group member noted that grace and forgiveness make it possible for us to respond to others. The researcher affirmed such a wonderful notion and then began a more general teaching on grace and forgiveness using that response as a springboard.

A primary feature of Wesleyan theology is the extension grace to humanity for the purposes of complete renewal into the image of God.<sup>184</sup> Such renewal is not solely for the benefit of the individual believer. The researcher reminded the group of the social aspect of the faith for Wesley. Albert Outler sums up the benevolent response of grace and forgiveness in the life of the believer: “Grace is the real activity of God in the human heart; it is the actual influence of God’s love in human existence. In its several dimensions it suffuses and affects all life....Grace is God’s love in action: in Christ, to reconcile us to himself; in the Spirit, to sanctify us wholly.”<sup>185</sup> The grace and forgiveness of God in our own lives makes us useful for re-presenting this grace in the lives of others that we encounter.

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<sup>184</sup> Marquardt, *Social Ethics*, 96.

<sup>185</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 188.

*Ministry Design*

The researcher and participants then began a discussion on what the social justice ministry at St. John would look like. The discussion led to the following tenets: The Social Justice Ministry of the St. John's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church would facilitate, coordinate, and schedule the social justice ministry activities of the congregation. Ministry membership and participation is open to all members of the congregation.

The Social Justice Ministry will endeavor to provide a broad range of opportunities to effect systemic change in our society including but not limited to: (1) Recommending policies in accordance with denominational goals and objectives, (2) Promoting family life in all its diversity, (3) Educating members on issues of social justice, (4) Engaging parishioners in works of charity and justice, and (5) Empowering the marginalized in the community.

Ministry activities would include, but not be limited to: support of homeless shelters, food pantries, meal programs, welfare reform, violence prevention, healthcare and advocacy. This would include collaboration with other nonprofit organizations in the area, whenever possible. The ultimate aim is the restoration of dignity and the desire to remind persons that we were created in the image of God. Our Wesleyan heritage reminds us that our response to God's grace in our own lives is the transmission of grace into the lives of others.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **REFLECTION, SUMMARY, AND CONCLUSION**

At the conclusion of this project, the researcher confirmed his hypothesis that preaching prophetic sermons with intentional Methodist social theology as a primary source is an effective tool to bring about the development of a social justice ministry in the local church.

At the very beginning of this project, the focus was on developing a desire to do intentional ministry using some of the core values of prophetic societal engagement. However, the researcher came to the realization and understanding that true transformation cannot take place within the congregation until it first takes place in the life of the person who will be conducting the transformation and introducing salvific truths in the lives of the participants. Thus, the project was realized not only for those who were participating but also for the preacher-researcher. The researcher also realized that the need for reawakening was necessary in the context of the St. John's Church and community. He concluded that the art of preaching is one of the necessary tools that any pastor or preacher can use to bring both awareness and to introduce and engage persons in ministry.

The researcher discovered that the preaching of social justice and Methodist social theology is as prophetic as it is in today's culture as it was in the days of Wesley himself. Prophetic preaching is preaching that seeks to solicit action on the behalf of the

listener. It is through the preaching of such sermons that persons have opportunity to learn and re-learn the call of God both on their lives both individually and collectively. The respondents' agreed that one can remain blind to the societal deprivation around them unless someone, the pastor-preacher in this case, calls them to account and God ultimately removes the blinders.

The struggle that the researcher found while conducting this project was the lack of preaching role models that were available for him to call upon in regards to preaching prophetic sermons from a Wesleyan or Methodist perspective. There were quite a few writings on the subject of Wesley's social ethics, but very little examples of preaching that utilized such ethics. As such, the researcher found it necessary, quite fittingly, to turn to the wealth of John Wesley's sermons and writings. However, the researcher highly recommends that Wesleyan scholars and theologians develop homiletical literature on social justice and ethics from a Wesleyan perspective.

The researcher understood and found that cultural differences and person's individual history did, in fact, affect the way one observes the need for social justice. For example, baby boomers were more prone to understand, at the very least, the need for social engagement, due to the fact that for the larger part of their lives, movements were a natural and common theme they faced daily. To achieve certain realities and benefits, struggle was a necessary component for black persons born in the 1940s and 50s. Those in Generation X, however, born in the 1960s to 80s, did not so readily or easily associate with the need for struggle or justice. This participants in this highly tech savvy, individualistic, and career flexible age range did had a difficult time coming to grips with the need for justice, admitted due, in part, to the fact that so much was provided for them



and struggle was not a constant theme in their lives. They were less empathic to the situation of the marginalized. Spiritually, both groups felt the need to be religious, but how religion is carried out is the dynamic mark of distinction. Certainly, the data demonstrates, generational differences play a role when it comes to faith, spirituality, as well as one's understanding of social justice or activism, especially carried out in the context of church.

The data suggests that neither gender nor socio-economic status affected the effectiveness of hearing prophetic sermons. In fact, both males and females responded favorably to the sermons and discussions. The only gender difference, in fact, was that more women than men felt the desire to take a hands on approach to social justice, in that more women were willing to engage personally with individuals, whereas men felt that donations to nonprofit organizations, for example, was as equally effective as meeting with persons face-to-face.

Taking an active stance in society is nothing new for followers of those in the tradition of John Wesley. He set the example for us to combine personal and social piety. Ever since predecessor churches to contemporary Methodism flourished in the United States, it has been known as a denomination involved with people's lives, with political and social struggles, having local to international mission implications. Such involvement is an expression of the personal change experienced in baptism and conversion. In fact, perhaps one of the benefits that may have played a factor in the convincing of St. John's participants to become amenable to develop a community social justice ministry is the fact that it is a historic reality that was once embraced by this congregation. Tubbs-Tisdale reinforces this view as she writes:

One of the realities of congregations is that people are often far more likely to embrace a new vision for the future if they see it as being in continuity with valued traditions of the past than if it seems to come to them 'out of the blue' without any connection to who they are or have been as a people of God.<sup>186</sup>

This project has observed the theme of justice from a variety of perspectives. As a result of the research and the life changing nature of such a project, the researcher concludes that when justice is rooted in something deeper than law or denominational polity, it has the potential for being transformative. Micah's words in Micah 6:8 are, again, a source for intense reflection. Even though they are simple, they are perhaps so simple that we fail to understand them. Justice begins with a humble walk with God, who will transform us as we journey, while gracing us with the knowledge, strength, wisdom, and confidence we need to do what needs to be done in our respective communities. The integrity of our Christian faith and witness is on the line as we stand as Christ's witnesses in the world.

The researcher understands now that shifting the church from an indifference to the life of service and social justice cannot be merely programmatic. It must be authentic and begin with the leadership of the community. Ultimately, if social justice is going to be a dominant theme in the life of St. John's Church, and any congregation, for that matter, it must be taught and embraced by the whole of the congregation.

The contemporary pan-Methodist church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out a faith perspective, not just responding unadvisedly or blindly to the

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<sup>186</sup> Tubbs-Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 51.

trouble and movements that exist in our society. The kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ will ultimately be completed, but until that day, the church must work to establish signs of its presence in individual lives and structures and in doing so fulfill the great commission to bring all people under God's rule. However, ultimately the kingdom cannot be built upon mere human rights alone, but by the extension and embracing of grace and justice for all persons. May we, like children, trust and walk with God and learn to embrace the prophetic vocation that belongs to all.

## **APPENDIX A**

SERMON TEXT: NEHEMIAH 3:5

SERMON TITLE: BEAUTIFUL MUSIC FROM THE BAD NOTES

**SERMON TEXT: NEHEMIAH 3:5****SERMON TITLE: BEAUTIFUL MUSIC FROM THE BAD NOTES**

On an extremely tight schedule, I prayed that everything necessary would be synchronized to ensure that I would return home that Saturday to perform the marital ceremony of a young couple that excitedly wanted to be joined in holy matrimony by me the only pastor, by their self admission, either of them had ever known. Both saved, baptized and counseled by me indicating that neither had ever heard to their remembrance anyone else's pastoral preaching in their lives. You can therefore imagine the anxiety I felt when I smiled and expressed how honored and overjoyed I was to be so wanted to participate in this life changing and eternally significant moment. I immediately checked my phone and almost lost my sense of confidence and joy when I saw where I would have to be traveling back from, and after preaching, in order to make it there on time. I began to pray that everything that needed to be right would be right. If in fact I would be to stand at the altar on that Saturday at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, it's what scholars call the need for synchronicity. I needed for there to be a coincidence of events that seemed related but that are not obviously caused one by the other. I needed for there to be perfect weather in a place that had a reputation for early morning fog. I needed for the hotel I was staying in to not have any mechanical wakeup call mishaps because they needed to shake me from deep slumber and sleep at 4am in the morning. I needed for transportation to be sitting out front, ready to load me up along with my bags the moment I made exodus from the door; with the hope that no one would've gotten on the road we would need to travel on, that all cars would have gas in them, all tires would be perfectly inflated, every driver would be alert and paying attention to all the road

conditions, traffic signs and speeding allowances. Much to my surprise, I got to the airport on time, checked my bags, walked confidently to the gate, walked onto the flight right on time. That plane pulled back from the gate, made its arrogant ascent into the sky, cloudless morning, sun already kissing the earth, I sat back with my seatbelt fastened and I thought to myself, perfect synchronicity.

When I finally opened my eyes on the plane, tires were touching the ground, brakes were being applied, and other passengers were waking and stirring from slumber. I looked at my watch and we had landed right on time. One flight down and one flight to go. Got off that flight and couldn't help but to thank God because in nearly fifteen years of traveling, my connection gate was right across the concourse from the gate I was walking from. I sped over there, sat down and said to myself, nothing can go wrong today. That connecting flight landed on time, landed in Chicago just as promised. I jumped off the plane, ran down the concourse, pushed people out the way, ran down the escalator, got to the baggage claim; a baggage claim, mind you, that is reputed to take 30 minutes to send bags around the belt and when I got there, there was my bag already circling around the belt.

I got in my car, drove out of the parking structure thinking, God must sure love me today. I had not in a long time had that kind of return home so I kicked up my Kanye West, I mean Kirk Franklin, leaned back in the driver's seat, put my hand to the wheel and started to make my way excitedly to church and I didn't get three miles as I headed onto the freeway when I got hit by a wall of colossal backed up traffic that came to a complete standstill. And I could see way down the highway, cars turned sideways, no emergency vehicles with lights flashing to be found, and there I sat for forty-five minutes

waiting for an opening to make my way to church. When I finally did get to church, five minutes before the wedding started, I now had lost my good mood, my little suit was wrinkled, I was frantic and nervous, full of anxiety, frustrated and I'll admit, I felt setup by God. My question was: why would God allow everything to be so perfect and then let me get so close to destination, and get hit by this colossal interruption in an otherwise smooth day?

And I was bold and brash enough to pray and I complained to God about it. I would rather God you had let the flight be delayed and let the traffic be jammed in the outgoing city than to allow me to swell with confidence and then get hit by this uninvited, unexpected disappointment. And I felt God pressing me in the place of my own prayer complaint; he forced me to look down at my watch and I realized here I was standing exactly where I needed to stand at the exact time I needed to be there, with a day full of things that could've gone wrong but that did not and the one thing that did go wrong could not prevent me from being where I needed to be. And here I was complaining when in point and fact, God had worked it all out and even managed delay to ensure that I would not miss the essential and important elements of my day.

Now, I lay out that long sermonic runway to suggest to you how I felt that day in backed up traffic is how I know Nehemiah had to feel. When everything up until now has been going perfect in his attempt to do what he could do to lead the Israelites, in rebuilding broken walls and repairing gates that lie in burned disrepair, to this point everything has been perfect. He needed the king to see that he was spiritually and emotionally charged and burdened, particularly about the condition of his people after returning from hard exile and God answered his prayer. He needed the king to be

welcoming enough of what was needed to give Nehemiah leave of absence so he could go and do what was burdening his heart and God answered his prayer. He needed the journey from displaced Jew to the determined leader of a half constructed wall to be smooth and God gave him that. He needed for Israel to be embracing of the call to try to do now what they been unsuccessful at doing for fourteen years and God gave him that. People started jumping and working at the wall and the names in chapter three, you ought to never bypass names in scripture, they are all important, the names in chapter three are descriptions of people who should not be infused to work and yet here they are at the wall. Priests and pottery makers, men and women from faithless families, people whose personalities needed to be sanded down by the presence of a life changing God. People whose histories connected them to others who didn't believe, who couldn't achieve and yet the names in chapter three describe the people who were determined to look past mistakes, to overcome obstacles, and to try what hasn't been working; believing that just because it has not worked doesn't mean it cannot work. So you can imagine Nehemiah is grateful, things are going smooth, perfect synchronicity.

That is until right in the middle of this positive momentum, spiritual energy, this charged culture, the bible says the men of Tekoa whose nobles would not go to the wall to do anything. The NIV says that they would not put their shoulders to the work.<sup>187</sup> Those of you who have ever done extended study on scripture understand that sometimes our English translation can be an extreme, sanitized version of the original text. In the ancient Hebrew, the text is not as sanitized. It reads like this: they would not give their necks to the yolk. And anybody who leads any group of people in any discipline or

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<sup>187</sup> Nehemiah 3:5 NIV



sphere knows the difference, when in the ancient text it suggests that they would not give their necks to the yolk. In other words, they would not submit to being told what to do by Nehemiah, nor by Ezra. They could not follow, they would not surrender or submit while everybody around them was working and celebrating and believing and charged to get the work done. These nobles from Tekoa would not put themselves under the authority of Nehemiah.

Now, we don't know if the issue was that it was Nehemiah they would not submit to meaning that they were not opposed to the work they just didn't like the man. Or was it the fact that they were opposed to the work while they carried a high respect and admiration for the man. Maybe they just didn't believe that after all this time with the project not working, that any effort would be wasted effort, because fourteen years is a good track record to teach you that it probably cannot be done. Or could it have been that they were determined to not follow the man and they weren't determined to follow the plan. We don't know, but what we do know is that they are the first group to place a potential ripple in an otherwise smooth project.

And Nehemiah has to be thinking, as I was that day sitting in backed up traffic: how could things be going so smoothly and then all of a sudden, an unexpected, unwanted, uninvited interruption leaks in. But life is like that is not it? Life can be going along smoothly, you blink, and next t you is an empty yolk. That symbolizes some type of unwanted resistance in your life to the things you are pursuing or the things you are attempting to build. Can I tell you the fact that the writer has given both scriptural space and attention to this potential snag is certainly a strong indication that everyone of us can

expect that as we travel, as we live, as we work, as we attempt to build lives to the glory of God that we too will often be met by these threats to smooth progression.

A teacher of sacred music has suggested, William Harrison will have to tell you whether I'm telling you the truth or not, but this sacred music teacher has suggested that there are times when a composer will intentionally insert a discordant note into a musical score. A skilled composer will intentionally put a note that does not sound harmonious to the other notes. Now the goal of course is to accentuate the purity and the flawlessness of the music surrounding the discordant note. In other words, to make good notes stand out, a composer will insert a bad note that draws your attention to how pure the sound was before the discordant note and how flawless the sound is after the discordant note.

Now the question is: why would a composer do this and the answer is interesting. The temptation of the listening and consuming ear is to hear perfection so much that one becomes lulled into a casual expectation that every note ought to feel perfect like the preceding note. And the composer doesn't want the ear to fall asleep until it cannot hear the necessary transitions or modulations or sense the change in mood or melody. So, a skilled composer will insert a strange note. It doesn't fit; it clashes against the score that has been played thus far and notes that will be played after. So that the ear that is about to fall into comfortable insensitivity hears the discordant, clashing, hard note, it awakens the listening sensitivity. It shakes the feeling of over comfortable expectation that you as the listener play no part in the musical progression. Can I suggest to you that it's done to shake us from a dangerous level of comfort to keep the ear attentive and expectant? It makes you live on the edge of the sea rather than push back in immobile ineffectiveness.

Now, you and I know that God is writing a melody of spiritual perfection, providence and purpose on the tablets of each of our hearts. And wouldn't it be nice if the musical score that describes your life that describes your circumstances were without any of these discordant notes? Wouldn't it be nice that once we sign up for God's melodious choir that God would ensure that there be no demanding discordant notes? No harsh, unpleasant, clashing notes. But God, the creative composer of life's journey inserts these clashing notes from time to time because you're not expected to love God until you fall asleep from spiritual involvement, ministry activity, walking around with a sense of spiritual entitlement, just believing that things are going to go smooth because you love Jesus and Jesus loves you. No, God allows for the men of Tekoa to resist our otherwise smooth attempts because their discordant notes remind us of how special the sound is in our lives; reminds us of how special the composer of the sound is in our lives; and that God is writing something worth us paying attention to.

And so I wonder who is in St. John's today has perhaps theologically misinterpreted the discordant notes in your own life? Where because you're going through something tough and rough, that you think somehow that God doesn't love you or that God favors others over you. Or that you're no longer effective, or needed or wanted or appreciated because all you're hearing are these unpleasant, clashing, inconsistent notes as they bang against what is previous, pure, and flawless notes. Could it be that God sends the men of Tekoa? Could it be that God allows or inserts on purpose these discordant notes to shake us from a false sense of spiritual expectation? Could it be that God sends the men of Tekoa or the discordant notes to show us just how special we are to him and how special God ought to be to us? Could it be that God sends/inserts

these discordant notes to get us to wake up, to stop expecting that you don't play a part in the musical exchange that defines the pathway and pilgrimage of your life? Is it to shift us back to alert status where we become hungry again for the things of God, grateful for God's spiritual gifts, ready to serve in ministry with the goal being to bring glory to an awesome God?

Now I'm in good biblical company, because you do remember when the Hebrews made their exodus, they left singing free at last, free at last thank God almighty, we're free at last. What a harmonious melody. That is, until those peaceful notes were replaced by the discordant note of having to do time in the wilderness. These are the potholes that appear in marriages. Those late discoveries in hopeful relationships. It's the shakeup of things we let allow us to become too comfortable until we rely of them rather than rely God. It's that cab driver in Tampa Florida who shared his nightmare testimony of his medical drug delivery business. For him a dream come true, entrepreneurial venture and opportunity successful exploded immediately, and then he tells me while I'm sitting in the back of that cab, how betrayed he was by one crooked, minute late investor, whose money wasn't really needed but who illegalities tore this man's dream down and turned it into a multi-year nightmare; left him broke, in court, trying to convince judges that he should not spend the rest of his life in jail and now he sits outside a Florida mall waiting for cab fares to jump in the back of the cab to announce where they would like to be dropped off. An honorable vocation if you love it, but a disappointment when it is forced upon you. I started sharing my story, I then shut up to let him share his, and when he told me his, I had to ask, aren't you angry? He commented to me, Reverend, I'm not angry, I'm grateful. Because I like the person I am better on this side of my experience than the

person I was on the other side. Back then, I was an arrogant, insensitive person; I married a woman but never was a faithful husband, I birthed kids, I was never a faithful father to, and now with no money, with my empire having been destroyed, every day I wake up with eyes cleared. My wife whispers in my ears how proud she is of me that I could go from millionaire status to driving a cab. I could not hear the beauty or purity of those flawless notes without the insertion of that discordant note. This is the encouragement we all need. If you're a student you need to know that every professor or teacher who inserts that red line discordant note on all your papers or exams is not because they don't like you, not because they are just out to have red marks on papers, it's because you cannot escape life without some discordant notes. You'll learn how to appreciate how doing right builds muscle for the times that discordant notes hit.

Notice that these workers in the text do not stop to address the men of Tekoa, at all. They just keep working. Nobody stops to motivate them. And nobody at the wall ceases what they're doing to follow those who are resistant. When you are aware of how smooth God has made your attempts to live for him are, when you're aware of how blessed you really are, when you are aware of how favored you really are, you embrace even interruptions a little differently. He sends them when you can handle them and he makes you able to deal with them, in fact, he allows you to grow from these bad notes. Singers will tell you, that the flawless vocal pitch is never trained just against the backdrop of flawless music. For a person to develop a flawless pitch, to the extent that they can sing against harsh and clashing unexpected notes, they exercise the voice against those clashing notes. Its why many of you who have sung in choirs standing on the front row get upset when the director points and says: you in the soprano section, you move to

the last row. It's not that they don't like your note; they just need to match it against something that will not keep you on a clashing note. Ok, maybe music is not your thing.

Tiger Woods, despite his past and current problems, trained that flawless golf swing because his father understood that he would have to play in the professional circuit against the backdrop, at times, of galleries who did not like his darkened skin intonation. So the father would wait until Tiger was in the middle of that flawless backswing, and as he was about to shift into the downswing, his father would on purpose attempt to distract him. Because he was trying to teach him how to keep focus against clashing notes. Ok, maybe golf is not your sport.

Venus and Serena Williams, with her fine self, were taught that flawless foreswing and backswing because their father understood that maybe perhaps one day they would be center court Wimbledon against the backdrop of a gallery who did not like what they are doing in tennis and so their father would release the ball he wanted them to concentrate on and release a barrage of balls after it to teach them how to stay focused on the main thing and keep the main thing as the main thing.

All I'm trying to tell you is that you will not escape life without some of these discordant notes. And you have to learn how to keep your focus. You have to be anchored, submerged, cemented in your meta-narrative, the story you know to be true, if you're going to do ministry in this current day. Because if not, you will allow the backdrop of a multiplicity of meta-narratives or alternative stories to define the content of your life and one day you'll wake up not knowing in whom you have believed. But if Jesus is on whom you anchor your life, then your story does not change. It's in him I live, in him I move and in him I have my being. Not only that, when everything stops being

smooth in your life, you're not responsible for addressing everything that hits your life or those things that are trying to bring bad notes to your life's musical score. Remember, God cares for you. God delivers you. And there is much to be thankful for even against the backdrop of bad notes. In other words, start paying attention to what is still at the wall of your progression. God places these realities as much for our motivation as for our appreciation. A lot of what God is doing in your life is to give you that which will keep you at the wall. When bad notes are being blasted next to you, just like in the text, the men of Gibeon building in a territory controlled by people who are not part of their camp. But can I tell you when you handle these bad notes right, when you learn how to stay on pitch even when folk in your section have fallen off key; when you learn how to keep your key when folk lose their note or their mind; when you learn how to stick to your lyrics when folk are trying to change the words of the song, you will then understand that God arranges things and sends songs that inspire out of experiences that break other people's hearts, can bring revelation to you in places that are darkened for others, dreams for you that are nightmares for others, solutions for you that stuck places for others, breakthroughs for you that are breakdowns for others, transformations for you out of places that are restrictive for others. He can send liberation out of Birmingham jails, voting rights out of lunch counter beatings, progress out of war, ministry out of horrid near escapes, God arranges things. It doesn't always make sense, but you've got to anchor in divine synchronicity. Because he makes this work so that the work he's doing in you will produce a flawless pitch.

I'm done but I cannot leave without telling you that every time we gather together in this way, we do so to celebrate that historical discordant note that was inserted into the

musical score of humanities' progression. Smooth notes of eternal existence and that smooth note read something like this: He was before Abraham was. He was part of that divine collaboration that designed the making of man; you heard the harmonious flawless note: let us make man in our image. He gave brief but powerful expressions of this thunderous, melodious note showing up in Daniel's lion's den, or the three Hebrew boy's fiery furnace, born under blazing stars, raised as a boy saturated in temple Torah rehearsals, walked sea shores calling men and women to lives of devoted discipleship. The notes were harmonious, they were melodious, healings setting free, preaching setting the captives free, these are the pure notes of a symphonic life. But unfortunately, humanities' ears got dull. They stopped appreciating the pure, flawless notes of God's extended benevolence and a discordant note was inserted into the score of humanities song. And on a dark, fateful Friday, that note was so awfully unrelated to the melody that had been playing that all humanity found themselves shaken at the spiritual core. So much so, that only those of us who have learned how to stay on key are able to gather in church and sing our song even in a strange land. Some folk don't understand our song because it doesn't harmonious to the notes that are being played in the culture. But our song goes something like this:

At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,  
 And the burden of my heart rolled away,  
 It was there by faith I received my sight,  
 And now I am happy all the day!

Do I have a witness here? You ought to look at somebody and tell them stay on pitch. Doesn't matter what the pulpit is preaching in this current charismatic age, you stay



on pitch. You don't have to quote anything but the word of God, just stay on pitch. Can you stay on pitch and believe God until you see the raindrops you've been praying for? Can you trust God enough to turn your situation around? I don't know about you but I choose to trust God. I know the going gets tough and the hills are hard to climb but I choose to trust God. I don't know how God is going to do it, but I choose to trust God. I don't know all the answers, but I know the one who does. I don't know what the future holds, but thank God I know who holds my future. Will not God give you faith for the new day? Will not God straighten you out? Will not he fight your battles? Will not God make the even the bad notes sound so sweet?

## **APPENDIX B**

SERMON TEXT: LUKE 2:1-14

SERMON TITLE: THIS THING CALLED PEACE

**SERMON TEXT: LUKE 2:1-14****SERMON TITLE: THIS THING CALLED PEACE**

For the last week I have tried to keep my ears and my heart open as people have spoken about the word *peace* in my hearing. It is not that I was asking them to define the term for me. Instead, it was a matter of different people talking about their concern for peace from different points of view. Some of the voices and opinions about peace came to me by way of the news media. Some of the voices came from the world of entertainment. Others came from people with whom I was in conversation who were talking with me about the word *peace*.

Here are some of the opinions and points of view about peace that came to me just this week. There was a story in *The New York Times* about a doctor from the Central African Republic who left his country to study medicine in France. After several decades as a physician and researcher, the article said “he decided to leave the peace and security of his life in France in order to bring much-needed medical care to the people of his homeland.” In this case, peace was a physical location and an economic position that guaranteed happiness and security. Is that what the angels meant when they spoke of peace on earth?

A second allusion to the word *peace* that I encountered this week occurred as I watched the news coverage regarding the Connecticut elementary mass shooting. The parents and friends of victims said with a heavy sigh that more than anything else, they wanted some peace. For this people, peace involved the end of the emotional upheaval that nearly two dozen families and an entire community feel over this weekend and surely

for some time to come. Peace would be a sense of once again feeling settled safe in their community and knowing that their lives will eventually be restored to some order and normalcy. Parenthetically may I ask why do we as a society tolerate these massacres in increasing numbers? These mass shootings are happening with increasing frequency, and they more and more seem to be targeted directly against children. What does it say about us as a society that we continue to tolerate so much violence against children? What does it say about us, as a community of human beings, that we are willing to put our children (not to mention their teachers) in so much jeopardy? In every school I know they have lockdown drills, and the threat of invasive gun violence is taken very seriously. What kind of a society would let itself get to this point, to where teachers and students routinely have to practice what they will do when a shooter comes on campus? If you stand back from it for a minute, you realize that our continued shared tolerance of this violence directed against our children is insane. But still, I hear the word peace repeatedly.

The peace desired by the people from Connecticut was not that much different from what the man from France had given up in returning home to Africa. One group was in search of peace and the other man had given it up, but was either experiencing what the angels intended in the skies over Bethlehem?

Another reference to peace came to mind when I read the words of a person who had come out of a 20-year addiction to heroin. When attempting to explain why his addiction lasted so long and why his attraction to that drug was so powerful, he said, "Heroin gave me a certain amount of peace for a short period of time." That person is not alone; our nation and the world are crowded with people whose only way to soothe their spirits and calm their troubled minds is an over-reliance on drugs or alcohol.

Then there are the words from “Ma Dear” in *The Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, where Cicely Tyson was talking about the words “Peace, be still” that Jesus spoke to the winds and waves on the Sea of Galilee. Ma Dear reached into her purse and took out her hand gun and remarked that if you want to have some “peace be still” you better get yourself a “piece of steel.” There are a great many people who seem to feel more at peace when they are carrying a gun. Is that what the angels had in mind on the night that Christ was born?

All of these references concern the same word: *peace*. Is peace found by moving to a location that affords a quality of life that insulates a person from risk and danger as with the African physician? Is peace a state of mind, a deep assurance that life is slowly being restored to order as with the evacuee from New Orleans? Is peace the buzz, the high, the altered state of mind that comes to addicts and alcoholics once they have greatly indulged in their drug of choice? Is peace the reassurance of a pistol in your purse or a gun in the glove box of your car? Is peace a political arrangement established by people who represent different nations in a series of events we commonly refer to as a peace process? Are any of these comments or conditions an accurate reflection of what the angels had in mind when they serenaded the city of Bethlehem with the promise of peace on earth on that night when Christ was born?

What do you and I mean when we employ the word *peace*? There are several things I know for sure that tell me that none of these earlier discussions of peace is entirely true. Let me suggest several things about peace. First, peace comes only from God, and nothing else of this world can offer the peace promised by the angels. Second, peace cannot be experienced by a single person or by a certain group of persons if, at the

same time, it is being denied or withheld from others. Peace is as much between us as it is within us. Finally, the peace I want to see in the world must first be made alive in my own life. I cannot wait for peace to break out somewhere else; peace must begin with me!

Consider these aspects of peace one-by-one. First, the peace promised by God cannot be acquired through any of the countless consumer items of our materialistic society. Peace cannot be purchased, it cannot be charged with a credit card, it cannot be worn, it cannot be eaten, it cannot be driven and it cannot be hung in a closet or stored on a shelf or stashed in a safe deposit box. If the peace of God does not dwell in your heart, it cannot be found anywhere else. Too many people in our society are searching for peace in the shopping mall. They think if they can just make one more purchase and acquire one more possession, they will reach a state of contentment.

Are you one of those shop-a-holics who places shopping and buying and material things above everything else? There was a story online about a woman who was told by her husband that he would leave her if she did not stop so much shopping. Her response was, "Lord, I sure am going to miss that man." That person was convinced that nothing could replace the thrill and satisfaction that comes from buying some new, desirable item. Peace does not come out of your closet, your wallet, your refrigerator or your garage. If peace does not come out of your heart, it will not come into your life at all.

Peace is the certain knowledge that everything we have been told about God is true and certain. I have peace in times of crisis because I know the Lord will make a way somehow. I have peace in the time of death because I know "when the earthly house we live in shall be destroyed, we have another building, a house not made with hands, eternal

in the heavens.” I have peace in times of temptation because I know God who will “keep me from falling.”

Peace is our deeply held conviction that wars will stop not when one army defeats another but rather when all armies “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and study war no more.”<sup>188</sup> In other words, peace comes as I rely less and less on the things of this world and rely more and more on the promises of God. That is why Isaiah 26:3 can declare, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you.”

Peace is not limited or reserved for those times in life when everything is in perfect order. Peace is not the absence of tension or hardship; peace is the presence of tranquility within you in the midst of whatever storms may be raging around you. Peace is not a guarantor that every day will be easy and smooth. Instead, peace is the fruit of the spirit that blossoms in our souls and reminds us that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we can fear no evil because God is with us.

Living with a spirit of peace in the midst of the storms of life is what Herman Melville was describing in the character of the harpooner in his novel *Moby Dick*. Melville portrays all of the characters on the whaling vessel busy at work as they seek out the great whale that has become the obsession of Captain Ahab. Everybody on board is furiously at work except one, the harpooner. The harpooner is sitting still and undisturbed. The harpooner is not caught up in the frenzy that involves a ship sailing through a storm to catch up to and then kill a giant whale. Instead, says Melville, “The harpooner sits tranquil and rises with a sense of calm to do his work.” The storm and the

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<sup>188</sup> Isaiah 2:4 NIV

fury are going on all around him, but the harpooner is able to maintain a sense of tranquility and calm that allows him to do his job.

That is what peace looks like: tranquility and calm in the midst of the storms of life that allow you to get on with your life and do what needs to be done. That kind of peace does not come from anything this world can provide. That kind of peace comes only from God and, more precisely, from our relationship with God. Peace says that even though I may want it to be better, but I'm grateful that it's not worse. I'm satisfied; my good days outweigh my bad days. I have no need to complain because God's been good to me even when I didn't deserve it. I've got too much to give him glory over! There's nothing wrong with wanting it better but in the midst of wanting it better you better thank him that it is what it is because it could be worse!

Peace is not only my inward conviction that God will sustain me in the midst of all of life's crises but must also be a shared state of well-being enjoyed by all people. I cannot live in peace in a vacuum. My household cannot attempt to be at peace while those who live across the street or around the corner or on the other side of the world still find their world in chaos and torment. In other words, peace cannot simply be within us; peace must also exist between us. If you and I are out of fellowship with one another, then I cannot be at peace no matter what I possess or what I know. If my actions bring hurt or harm or humiliation to another human being, then I cannot be at peace because I have caused the distress of someone else.

That is the lesson this country and this world have to keep learning over and over again. There can be no peace as a nation if we seek to hurt, harm and/or humiliate other nations. We cannot increase our sense of peace by waging war on others. Is there



anybody in your life with whom you ought to be in fellowship but instead you are not on speaking terms? Are you trying to have peace in your life while there is trouble in your relationships with family, friends and co-workers? I say again, there can be no peace within us until there is peace between us. That is what Christ came to make possible: reconciliation among us. Christ came to give us the power to make peace among ourselves. We can speak the words of forgiveness. We can allow a person who has failed us once to walk on the path of second chances. Our lives will be so much richer and our burdens will be so much lighter when we set aside those things that stand between us and those who are closest to us. There can be no peace within us until there is peace between us.

The promise of the angel of Bethlehem was for peace on earth. That does not mean prosperity for us and grinding poverty everywhere else in the world. That does not mean that some people have access to medical care while millions cannot afford to see a doctor. Peace can never be fully enjoyed by some when it is being denied or withheld or made unavailable or unaffordable for so many others. Whatever the angels were announcing that day in Bethlehem, they wanted *all* of the people on the earth to fully share in its benefits.

Finally, if peace is ever going to occur on the earth, we cannot wait for somebody else to make the first move; peace must begin with us. The problem with the contemporary church is that we're waiting for the world to make the first move. We've got this thing backwards. We must initiate the action and tell someone, "I am sorry." We must go first and tell someone, "I forgive you." We must lead the way, set the good example and start doing in our own lives those things we would hope to see others do

some day. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, “We must be the change we hope to see in others.” If there is going to be peace on earth, then I have to be willing to initiate the action that can bring about that peace. The world will not be substantively changed if all of us simply wait for somebody else to make the first move. (If you want more love, start loving, joy, be joyful, kindness, be kind. Peace, be peaceful.) Peace must begin with us.

Now remember that we are not making the first move in the process of peace; God has already done that in Bethlehem. God did not wait for us to get ourselves together before He entered into human affairs. Paul says, “While we were still sinning” Christ died for the ungodly.<sup>189</sup> That verse can be translated in a verbal form so that the word “sinning” is emphasized as an ongoing act. Or it can be translated in a noun form so that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly.” Either way, God was not waiting for us to make the first move. Some folk say they are still looking for God. Baby you don’t even know where to look. God always makes the first move. God initiated the peace treaty and waited for us to respond. God has already made the first move; now all we have to do is respond in that spirit toward one another.

There was a member of a former church that I felt was being called to be a trustee. That person declined our invitation because, as he put it, “I am not through sinning yet.” I did not pursue any of the specifics of the issue in an attempt to find out what further sins he needed more time to perform. I simply took him at his word. As strange as that story may sound to you, that person is exactly the kind of person God is after. God seeks us while we are still sinners. God seeks us while we are still sinning. God goes first and then invites us to respond to what He has already done.

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<sup>189</sup> Romans 5:8 NIV

I have a friend in Chicago, Illinois who has the most unusual message on his voicemail. The message says: “This is Pastor Jones. Now, you say something.” In other words, he has made the first move, and the next move is up to the person on the other end of the phone. He has said all he is going to say; now the burden shifts to the other person. That is what God did for us in the Incarnation; God showed up in the person of Jesus Christ as if to say, “This is God. Now you say something. I have done my part. Now you do something. I have made the first move. Now you move in response to what I have already done.”

That is how peace is made; somebody has to make the first move. A holy God made peace with a sinful world by coming in the person of Jesus Christ and taking away the burden of our sins. Now that same God looks to each one of us and expects us to respond. Make the first move and invite somebody else to respond. Reach out over some wall of division and challenge somebody to reach back in forgiveness and love. Do not stand by and wait for someone else to make the first move. Follow the example of my friend: “This is Pastor Jones. Now you say something.” God stepped into nothing but chaos, fragmentation and disconnection and brought about cosmos, connection and good. In other words, God acted first, now you do something. God gave first, now you give something. God changed the world first, now you change something. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!

## **APPENDIX C**

SERMON TEXT: MATTHEW 1:23

SERMON TITLE: EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US

**SERMON TEXT: MATTHEW 1:23****SERMON TITLE: EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US**

At holiday time, there are things that most of us like to do, things that define the holiday for us. For some of us it is being around the dinner table that defines a particular holiday. Some look forward to a particular dish on the table, like Momma's sweet potato pie, corn pudding, turkey, ham, and homemade rolls. Still others may look to some other object or event to define the holiday, like singing carols around the piano or the annual Christmas party at work. All year long we look forward to that occasion when we can partake of that special delicacy, object, or event that signals the holiday season has arrived.

One of those events for me, other than eating those great special dishes, is the ability to preach from a particular text. On average, I preach nearly 60 sermons a year, but I always look to Christmas for a particular text that gives me comfort and that I have gone to at Christmas time. I draw from this particular text regularly during advent because for me it is the whole gospel of Jesus Christ.

The text is found in Matthew 1:23. It is a powerful, hope filled verse. It is actually the resuscitation of Isaiah 7:14; and Matthew's attempt to put forth prophetic credentials on the Messiah. By bringing in the prophecy of Isaiah as an Old Testament credential, Matthew is authenticating his understanding of Jesus: "Behold a virgin shall be with a child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is God with us" (KJV). What a powerful notion: God with us. Emmanuel, God with us, God electing to participate in the creation that he made.

It is the gospel in a single word - Emmanuel.

Emmanuel is the Incarnation - the love of God, the grace of God, the Holy Spirit, the existential and eschatological, all wrapped up in one. Emmanuel.

Emmanuel traverses the journey - from the cradle to the cross, and the resurrection. Emmanuel defines the relationship between the human and the divine. This one word makes clear the accessibility of God to each one of us. What a marvelous notion! If there wasn't already such a word as "Emmanuel," one would have to be invented because it so clearly describes what it means to have a God who has selected to participate in the creation.

That is what's so marvelous about Emmanuel. God has chosen to participate in the creation that He made. He could have made that creation and turned it fully over to the custodianship of those he had created. But He wanted to be a part of the creation He made. I don't know another religion where the creator deity has chosen to participate intimately in that creation.

That great theologian Soren Kierkegaard told a parable about a prince who fell in love with a peasant maid. He had noticed her passing by on the street and was instantly infatuated. He knew that if he went to her as the prince and told of his love, she would certainly accept. That would be the loyal thing to do. But he wanted her to have a genuine love for him. So he abandoned all of his royal finery and came to live as a peasant in her community. He shared her life with her, and in that sharing, she fell in love with him. When he came to be a part of her world she developed a deep and abiding love. It is because of Christ that we are able to love God. Since God, in Christ, came to be a part of

our world, we are enabled to know God as He really is, and to love Him with all of our hearts.

God left the throne of glory and participates in humanity, coming where we are. What a marvelous, comforting notion that, as we make our way through this veil of tears, the one who made us is available and accessible to us because He has chosen to be where we are. God is with us.

Sometimes that's all we need to know to keep going forward - God is with us. Against the odds, against the assaults of the human circumstance, we can make it if we know that God is with us. In the face of failing health and failing bodies, departing loved ones, challenging financial circumstances, and emotional depression, we can make it. We can stand the storm if we know that God is with us.

Is there a more important word? Is there a more important announcement to make to humankind than that: "The God who made you has not abandoned you; God is with us"? Is there a more encouraging word, is there a more hopeful notion that we can embrace and celebrate? God is with us!

That means that I can grab His hand because He's with us. That means I can speak to Him because He's with us. Because He's with us, I can hear His voice. Because God is with us. Because God is with us, there is cause for celebration. In light of the Incarnation, we can pray and talk to Him. But what does it mean in the light of the message of Advent? What does "God with us" mean in the light of the message of Christ? We may have our own abstract notions about what it means that God is with us. Let's unpack what it means for God to be with us.

1. It Means - God With Us for Us. That God is with us for us means that God is not driven because God needs to be where we are; for God does not need anything. If God needed anything, He would not be who God is - El Shaddai, God Almighty. The very characteristic of the eternal is that God is self-sufficient.

Have you ever thought about that? God doesn't need you. He doesn't need me. How can the Eternal need anybody? The One who has all creation, the ground of our being, the source of our strength. He who has all wisdom doesn't need anything. God doesn't need your estate holdings, because the cattle on a thousand hills belong to Him; the hills belong to him, too. He doesn't need your intellectual capacity because He already has all knowledge. He's omniscient and omnipresent.

Since God is self-sufficient, what drove God to come and participate in the creation is that God loves us. God is with us for us, for our sake. It is on our behalf that He has come down from the margins of glory and dwelt in our midst. He came because He cares so much for us. Read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." God came in Jesus Christ for us because we needed reconciliation. He understood that we need Him. We needed to be forgiven and put right with Him, and so He came for us. God is with us for us; love drove Him to us. Even in the face of disobedience, God was driven by God's love for us. And each one of us can reduce God's love to its least common denominator, "God loves me."

There's the story of a woman who lost her cat after 10 years of owning it. She went searching for a new cat. Her friends told her to go to a shelter or to order some pedigreed cat from an institution specializing in that. But one friend told her that there



was a stray cat that was hanging around at her former church, and in light of her recent loss, encouraged her to go over and get the cat. When she went over to the church, sure enough she found the cat. When she reached for the cat, it didn't resist. She put the cat in her car and the cat began to live with her. But the cat wasn't a pedigree. She was just an alley cat that got pulled off the street. She possessed nothing that made her worthy of all that attention and care. But the woman overlooked all of that and said I'm going to make you my cat, but not because there's something special about you or because you're so significant. It's not because you're so wonderful and beautiful, but just because I love. You haven't earned it. I just saw you for the first time and decided to bring you home with me and let you enjoy my home and its comfort just because I love you.

That's wonderful, is not it? But if we think that's wonderful, let's just think about what God has done for us. We must never get a big head thinking that the Lord must be blessing us because we're doing something good. He blessed us when we weren't doing the right things. He blessed us, protected us, and preserved our life. You know what God says? I love you just because I do. And no matter how bad you are, I cannot love you any less. No matter how good you are, I cannot love you anymore. I just love you!

God says, "I'm going to choose you and bring you out of the world. I'm going to fill you with my Holy Ghost. I'm going to dump grace on you. I'm going to extend your life. I'm going to supply your every need - not because you did anything special, but just because I love you. Now that's grace. And we experience that grace just because God loves us.

2. Next, It Means God With Us As Us. The Bible says that He was made flesh and dwelled among us, so He is with us as us. The first chapter of the gospel of John begins:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” and further explains in verse 14: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.” God is with us as us.

God had options; that’s what it means to be God. Being God means He can do what He wants anytime He wants. That’s what sovereignty is all about. Nobody can be like that but God. I don’t care how well off you are, no one has options the way God has. Since God has options, that means God did not have to save us as us. He could have spoken to the birds and put salvation in their wings so that when they flapped against the molecules of the air, the vibrations would cause stirring recurrences in our hearts, and we would surrender to His grace.

God could have caused the mountains to bubble over like a volcano, and the lava to run down the hillsides. When the lava took the land, all humanity would open themselves and surrender to the fact that there was but one almighty source and in that moment surrender to Him. But he did not choose the mountains. He could have put Himself in the aroma of the flowers and let their fragrance become the manifestation of eternal grace. The aroma split throughout the air could have reached out and grabbed those who found themselves in the dismal disgorge of the human circumstance, and because of the profound impact of that aroma they would confess, “I know the Lord and I love Him.” God could have done that.

God could have chosen any way to come, but the Bible says that God came as us. There needed to be somebody who would pour Himself into the human frame, and God did. Jesus Christ surrendered His eternal capacity, His passport to heaven, to be with us,

as us. Before the days of dual citizenship, when you wanted to become a citizen of another country, you had to give up your passport in order to become a citizen of that other country. That's what Jesus did.

Jesus was a citizen of heaven, but because He loves us so, he gave up heaven's passport and took on the restrictions of the human circumstance. Jesus came down through forty-two generations and dwelled among us. God lived in the mortal frame of humanity, participating on our behalf, God with us as us. The land of Persia was once ruled by a wise and beloved Shah who cared greatly for his people and desired only what was best for them. One day he disguised himself as a poor man and went to visit the public baths. The water for the baths was heated by a furnace in the cellar so the Shah made his way to the dark place to sit with the man who tended the fire. The two men shared the coarse food, and the Shah befriended him in his loneliness. Day after day the ruler went to visit the man. The worker became attached to this stranger because he "came where he was." One day the Shah revealed his true identity, and he expected the man to ask him for a gift. Instead, he looked long into his leader's face and with love and wonder in his voice said, "You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to eat my coarse food, and to care about what happens to me. On others you may bestow rich gifts, but to me you have given yourself!"

As we think of what our Lord has done for us, we can echo that fire tender's sentiments. Oh, what a step our Lord took - from heaven to earth, from the worship of angels to the mocking of cruel men, from glory to humiliation! Because He was with us as us, His voice was amplified by human lips. God with us as us could see our plight through human eyes. No other religion has a deity who so intimately knows humans'

circumstance. The eternal God, the abstract God, the intangible God has put on human form, which makes it possible for us to relate to him as a person. Because God took on the amorphousness of humanity we can say, “He walks with me, and talks with me and tells me I am His own. And the joy we share, no other has ever known.

Because He came as us, He knows our pain. He knows our tears and He knows our plight. He knows where our hurts lie. We can relate to Him and He can relate to us. He came for us as us.

3. God With Us and Has Never Left Us. God is with us for us as us. But that’s not all. Jesus said, “And I shall leave you a Comforter. And it will be with you.” God with us has never left us. You see, if God only had been with us as us, and dwelled in the limited restrictions of humanity, when He left, our relationship with God simply would have been a nostalgic encounter. We would always be going down the road looking back instead of looking ahead. If God has not fixed it so that His earthly sojourn was not just a visit, but a permanent engagement in the human drama, we would always be looking back, saying, “Do you remember Bethlehem?” or “Do you remember the miracles and the healings?” or “Do you remember the last meal?” or Do you remember Calvary, when God was with us?

But thanks be to God that God fixed it so that when He came in Jesus Christ, He never left. The Bible says that He left us the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit would comfort us, and guide us, and teach us, and direct us, so He never left us. Hallelujah!

That's why we can feel Him, because He never left. He's not just a historical Jesus; he's not just a Nazarean and a carpenter's son. He's the continuing reality of God who, every now and then, causes me to feel something down on the inside of my soul.

He's that something within me that holds the reins. I can go to Him in the midnight hour because He never left.

He's still healing because He never left.

He's still making a way because He never left.

He's still calling the dead from death because He never left.

4. Finally, It Means that God With Us Is Coming Back For Us. I live in the tense of the already and not yet - He's already coming. Hallelujah! He's coming back! To be already and not yet at the same time, that's who Jesus is. He's already and He's not yet. He's already Savior, but He will be King.

He's already Lord, but He will be Lord of Lords. He's already died, but He will live. He's already saved, but He will celebrate. He's already and not yet. He's been here, but He's coming. He's Bethlehem, but He's also New Jerusalem. He's the old earth and the new earth. Now behold I show you a new heaven and a new earth. For the old earth passed away, and behold a new earth, He's already coming back.

Emmanuel - very God and very man at the same time. Emmanuel - God with us, for us, as us, never left us, coming back to get us!

One day when heaven was filled with His praises

One day when sin was as black as could be

That's when Jesus came down to be born of a virgin

Dwelt among men, my example is He

Living he Loved Me, Dying he saved me, Buried He carried my sins far away, Rising he  
justified me, Freed me forever, One day he's coming back, glorious day!

## **APPENDIX D**

SERMON TEXT: LUKE 17:3-4

SERMON TITLE: WHAT FORGIVENESS LOOKS LIKE

**SERMON TEXT: LUKE 17:3-4****SERMON TITLE: THE FACE OF FORGIVENESS**

In the very provocative French play, *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo introduces the world to Jean Val Jean. As a vagabond who is just released from prison, he is in midlife wearing threadbare trousers and a tattered jacket after serving 19 years in a French prison. When finally he is released from prison, the story is told that he walks four straight days in the Alpine chill only to find that every place he would seek to lay his head would turn him away. No tavern would feed him. Finally he stands in front of a door, he doesn't at that time know separates him from a bishop that will forever change his life. Bishop Muriel is 75 years old, he's lost everything in his life; the fierce revolution took all of his valuables, leaving him with but a few pieces of silverware, one soup ladle and two candlesticks. Val Jean tells his story of lengthy incarceration, his four day journey, and his repeated denials of human hospitality. And he really expects, upon meeting the bishop, that the bishop would treat him just like everyone else has and close the door in his face. Instead the bishop is kind, he opens his door to him, pulls Val Jean in, stands him near the fire, allows him to warm his chilled body. He says to him, you don't need to tell me your story because this is not my house; this is the house of Jesus Christ. He takes the man to his table. They share soup, bread, fig, cheese and wine. And they enjoy these with the only thing the bishop has of any worth and value, silverware.

Then, after they've dined sufficiently shows Val Jean to a bedroom. And in spite of desperately needing sleep, the ex prisoner cannot sleep and in spite of the unusual kindness of the bishop, this ingrate just cannot help himself. He gets up and begins to stuff the bishop's silverware into his knapsack. The bishop sleeps and is obviously unaware that he is now being robbed. Val Jean doesn't get far, though. He is immediately



caught by the police; they march him right back to the bishop's house. And Val Jean while being marched back to the house knows that this probably means his is going back to jail for the rest of his life. Just then, as they arrive at the bishop's house, something wonderful happens; and what takes place forever changes his life. Before the officer can explain the crime, the bishop steps forward and says: "Oh here you are, I'm so glad to see you again. I cannot believe you forgot the candlesticks." Maybe you didn't know they are made of pure silver, too, just like the other items I gave you." The bishop dismisses the policeman and then, drawing closer to the ex-convict, the Bishop said, "Jean Val Jean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from dark thoughts and the spirit of hell and perdition, and I give it to God." The forgiveness of this man changes his life until he eventually becomes the mayor of that same town. He builds a factory, he gives jobs to the poor, he takes pity on a dying mother, he raises her daughter and what changed him forever was not that he was able to escape a jail sentence, not that he was able to successfully rob a bishop, no, what changed him forever was that he lived forgiven.

This is what, my brothers and sisters, Jesus is teaching in Luke 17. This chapter is quite interesting because it's really a small collection of four independent sayings of Jesus directed specifically to disciples. And what Jesus says to them hinges on two focused questions. These two questions shape the thematic and theological focus of the entire chapter. Question number 1, what are disciples of the Lord called to do? Question 2, are the disciples of the Lord able to do it. It's a part of this first saying that teaches us the answer to this very first question. What are disciples supposed to do? And Jesus, in no uncertain terms, says disciples are supposed to forgive. Be alert, if you see your friend

going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it's personal against you and repeated seven times through the day. Seven times he says I'm sorry, I will not do it again, forgive him. The disciple of Jesus is called to a responsible use of his or her influence and I hope you catch it, to a limitless forgiveness of those who sin against them, who in this text come back repentant.

Now, I want to warn you before we study this for our own lives. That when the disciples heard what was being asked of them regarding this, not causing another to stumble, forgiving repentant sinners without limits, they felt it so demanding that in the same chapter they asked Jesus, Lord you've got to increase our faith. The teaching on forgiveness was more than they could warmly welcome and remember they are close up front followers of Christ.

The struggle of Jesus' saying is not the need to forgive, make no mistake about it, that's difficult but not impossible, especially once, twice, maybe three times. But the challenge Jesus raises here is what happens when in the course of a day the same offender keeps doing things that injure me? And I would quickly note that Jesus is not in this text talking about the same offense being repeated, resulting in the same injury as much as in this specific text, he is talking about the same offender repeating a different offense each time throughout the length of the day. And the reason this is significant is because if the same person keeps doing the exact same thing then you have to question the integrity of that person's repentance. But here, Jesus is referring to a person who injures you one way, repents, asks for forgiveness, you forgive them they go right out and do something else that injures you, comes back, says I'm sorry, you forgive them, they go out and do something different that offends you, comes back asks you to forgive them, you do and

the cycle keeps repeating itself. And here it is, Jesus says in spite of how many repetitive times you have been injured by that same person, here's what I expect of you, child of God, I expect you to keep offering to him or her forgiveness.

Now, for the sake of full disclosure I'll admit to you all that this is where you need a healthy relationship with Jesus. You cannot be no I got saved yesterday, I got saved once a month, I only pay a little tiny offering, I don't do any extra service, no you've got to really know God in order to respond to this text the way Jesus expects you to. Because honesty being our principle guide this morning, it's hard enough family forgiving somebody once for what they do to you. But Jesus has the nerve to turn around and challenge me and stretch my faith like this to say to me: if all day long, a person keeps doing me wrong and comes back and says I'm sorry then I'm expected to forgive them over and over again, it's almost crazy. Jesus you've got me messed up. I can barely be in the same room with them; you tell me I need to forgive them too? I'm just saying what you all are thinking. It's incredulous; it's absurd to consider that I'm going to keep forgiving somebody repetitively when the person keeps injuring me repeatedly. Now is not that, in our estimation if we operate on the foundation of human philosophy, is not that just a mismanagement of my own life? That's me devaluing myself. That's me not operating with integrity. I love myself too much to keep putting myself in that kind of position, I'll let somebody hurt me once but I'm too grown, I've got too much, I've fought too hard, I've come from too far to turn around and let somebody just repetitively injure me like this. We all have these repeat offenders in our lives and the furthest thought from our minds is that I'm going to keep accepting apologies and repentance and keep bring more silverware to the door for them to put in the knapsack after they've taken

it already. They've abused my kindness, my consideration, my patience and my prior forgiveness. But Jesus says, hold up, watch yourself. Remember that's how he opens verse three, because he knows that when somebody hurts you your first response in your nature and flesh is to want to pay them back and to get exacted retribution: I'm going to get some revenge, I'm going to hurt them proportionate and to the degree that they hurt me, not a soul, nobody is getting any sleep in this house, but Jesus says, watch yourself...if your brother sins, speak sharp words to him. And if he's sorry and turns from his sin, forgive him. Then he does this, what if he sins against you seven times in one day? If he comes to you and says he's sorry and turns from that sin, forgive him...now I know what you all are asking, because I asked it to family, how do you do this?

And the text teaches us, the focus here in the initial instance, is not on the repetitive cycle of the offense, our focus is on the repetitive resiliency of our forgiveness. You don't get upset because of how many times God expects you to forgive, you praise God that he gives you the capacity to keep on forgiving. Did you catch it? It's not how many times they offend, it's that you never run out of forgiveness for that offender and it's not because you don't want to, it's because how full you are with the presence of God and when God saturates your life internally and externally; one of the things that blows your mind is that God gives you the capacity to do in the spirit what you just cannot do in the flesh.

But Pastor Gordon, they keep doing things...you just don't understand....I think they are doing it on purpose... Well it's not as much an issue for you as the strength of the presence of the Holy Spirit that the Holy Spirit brings to you. Here it is: the spirit of

God makes you so strong that no injury strips the integrity of your spirituality. See, this is why you're not impressing folk that you're a strong Christian when your worship and attitude has such volume and temperature when everything is going right. See I'm impressed when you don't let people who have offended you stop you from being a joy filled disciple who gives God unapologetic praise. This means, it doesn't matter what you've done to me, the only thing that really matters is that when I got up this morning I was still strong enough to say this is the day that the Lord has and I shall rejoice and be glad in it. Yea, I'm not praising him because I survived the offense, I shout because God keeps giving me the capacity to get up from the stuff that knocks other people down. The spirit makes you strong and capable of doing what others who are not full of the spirit are incapable of doing.

So here it is, the ability to forgive like this really then becomes a revelation of how much maturity clothes your life. You have grown beyond the need to see others suffer because they made you suffer. You get here because you're at a place where you care more about honoring God than getting even with somebody else, which becomes a further revelation that you have battled and won against the demon called selfish. Making your life more about sacrifice than winning. One of the ways God exercises the strength of your ability to forgive is by liberating you from the demon of keeping score. When you go around keeping score, you become a prisoner of limitations, restrictions. And my point is this and I'll move on, you cannot be a strong disciple if you walk around saturated by limitations and restrictions. When you walk around talking about, this the last time I'm going to let so and so do this to me...this the last time I'm going to let them take advantage of me, it's been too much and how many more can God expect me to deal with

it? No, instead my focus is not on that. It's on the strength of my surrender to live as a forgiving person. And when I make this my surrender and place my forgiveness on the altar, God creates more space in my life and I remove limitations, I can forgive with repetition, why, because I stopped keeping score, you know why, because all scores were wiped out on a hill called Calvary.

So watch this, when you're in relationship with people and they walk around mad and bent out of shape, frustrated on the inside, you can tell because you ask them what they're doing for the holiday and they still bringing up what somebody did to them. (I didn't ask you that...) And what you know is that they're going around keeping score. But when you've been freed from keeping score, even if somebody else brings it up, you can say yea that's them but I've forgotten all about that. In fact, God has been so good to me that I don't have time to go backwards and re-live stuff that was part of a negative portion of my history. Because what God has done since then has been enough to blow my mind. Since they hurt me, God has given me crazy joy. Since they offended me, God has healed my wounds. Since the time they lied on me, God has given me a peace that somehow surpasses all human comprehension. Do I have a witness in the house?

Therefore, keeping score has to be removed from my life if I am to be a person who forgives because the scorecard will not reflect balance. It's going to always show that I keep getting injured and the offender keeps getting off Scott free. But while the scorecard shows that that fact is true, the rule book which is the bible shows that you're doing nothing more than just planting seeds for expanding the kingdom. You're just assisting the kingdom to make soil ready for God to plant his presence in another persons' life. You've got to stop keeping score. (Tell your neighbor, don't keep score).

See some of you all said it, but you know good and well you got a log book that you can whip out at any time and list the offenses that someone has done to you. In 2009 you lied to me, June 2010 you cheated, March 2011 you didn't say thank you, July of 2012 you didn't return my dish. No, don't keep score. Don't keep a file. Look at how good God has been to you. So good in fact, Eugene Peterson quotes the psalmist in Psalm 130 and says if you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings, who would stand a chance? As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit, and that's why you're worshiped. And so you ought to trust the work of forgiveness to do something in somebody else.

The goal is the other person becoming closer to God with each repentant cycle until at last they grow beyond the need for my forgiveness because they become transformed into what God has visioned for them. So the question is: do you this morning have a vision for another person's growth or are you only selfish to perceive your own? When you have a vision for another's growth, you go to the door with the rest of the silverware. And you say to the robber in front of the cops, why didn't you take this, I tried to give it to you... When you have a vision for another person's growth, you offer forgiveness as a spiritual sacrifice to push someone else closer to the Lord, which bleeds into the second point.

There's the resiliency of forgiveness and then number two, forgiveness as an offering. Forgiveness is my offering. When I forgive someone else, it is an offering I am giving to God. When I give forgiveness to another person, I am making a spiritual offering to the Lord. What am I offering? I'm offering myself, but I'm also offering that person, free of having been affected, distracted or dissuaded, regarding whatever view God wants them to have of him based on their encounter with us. Can I unpack that?

You know why some people have yet to come to the Lord? It's because they met us. And they say, if this is what salvation looks like, I don't want it. If this is what anointing talks like, then I don't want it, which is why God presses us to forgive so that we don't stand in the way of his process in somebody else's life. When I cannot forgive, I then affect the kingdom's witness by what unforgiving response is to the person who injured me and what my unforgiving actions may be likewise, which then can be a tool of the enemy to frustrate the spiritual work God is doing in the life of the offender. So I have to remember that God is shaping them and part of shaping them was them injuring me. So that I could offer in response forgiveness that then becomes a stimulant for them to understand the enormity of the forgiveness of God. I want what I offer God to be a pleasing and generous and obedient and acceptable sacrifice and I cannot do that unless I'm willing to offer it to him even when it hurts me!

Family, I'm with you. I don't want to keep forgiving either. I got folk in my life even when I walk past them the devil puts in my mind: God at least let them trip or fall or faint, give me some sense of satisfaction. I don't want to keep having to forgive, but I'll tell you what I do want to do, I want to keep giving God offerings that God likes with regard to my life. So, I will forgive again and again because I want my forgiveness to be an acceptable offering. Every offering, forgiveness and otherwise, is an opportunity to demonstrate to God what I feel is his worth in my life. See this is why I push you to develop a lifestyle of worship. Because everything from the altar on back is not here to entertain you. Everything from the altar on back is nothing more than a stimulant to help you become persuaded to offer yourself as an offering to God. And do I have at least 25 people in here who can testify, with everything God has done for me, I don't have to be



pushed to give him an offering, I'll make my life an offering because I'm grateful for what God has done for me. And every now and then we ought to come up in here where the choir cannot make it to sing and the preacher cannot make it to preach because we are so overwhelmed by the presence of God in our lives over the past seven days. With the healing God gave me this week. With the stuff God showed me this week. With the love God placed on me this week. With the enemies he made my footstool this week. Said I wasn't going to tell nobody but I just couldn't keep it to myself. Because I want God to know how much he is worth to me.

So again, every offering is an opportunity to exercise releasing what I am tempted to control. In this case, retribution and revenge and in exchange giving God the offering of forgiveness. Because I'll tell you this, if you cannot give it to God as an offering then it controls you. If I cannot forgive then that means I'm controlled by my emotions that are not sacrificed unto the Lord and at the end of the day I don't want to be controlled by anything other than the Holy Spirit. So I offer my forgiveness to exercise mastery over what the enemy is trying to use to control me. Every offering is then an attempt to worship God, to show God love and adoration or him. And as you see, I haven't even mentioned the offender because when forgiveness is a gift that you give back to God as an offering, you're not even focused on the offender. You're only focused on giving you back to God.

Finally number three and I'm done; there's the resiliency of forgiveness, forgiveness as my spiritual offering and then finally forgiveness is recognition of my acceptance of the balance of life. The frustration of this teaching is that: if I'm honest, I don't want to think about a whole day when I have to be injured repetitively by the same

person. My problem with the text is not the whole forgiveness piece; my problem is that Jesus is forewarning me that it is possible for me to go an entire day being injured repeatedly by the same person. See, when I read scripture and I put myself in the context of the text and try to sit down in the setting of the text, I raise questions. And my question is this: Jesus, I'm with you on the forgiveness because I am forgiven, and I don't mind giving it because I've received it. But now, you are going to warn me about some heinous stuff. I would've preferred it to read, in the morning, when the offender offends you, forgive them, and by noon, be free. I can handle that. But look at the text. Jesus says; if in the day the person keeps injuring you and keeps coming back to say I'm sorry forgive them. This means, it is possible, for you to traffic in the market place a whole day being injured by the same irresponsible person. Now if you all are like me, I want to think that the enormity of my forgiveness offered in response to what they did to me the first second and third time would be enough to change them and if not change them God at least bless me and set me free from them. God let me enjoy the first fruits of my repetitive obedience and give me at least part of my day without having to choose how lavish my offering of forgiveness is going to have to be this time. But what Jesus raises is this: be prepared, St. John, to go the distance. Be prepared to balance your life between injury and blessing. Be prepared so that you don't give an open opportunity to the enemy by anchoring into a false theology that irresponsibly prognosticates that if I'm really in love with Jesus he exempts me from these kind of days, the devil is a liar. If you belong to the Lord, he may need to trust you to keep being injured by the same person, watch this, because it may take the whole day for that person to understand the strength of your

forgiveness in their lives. And God sent me to ask you can he put you on the marathon team or are you only good enough to run with the sprinters?

So be prepared, every time I give God forgiveness as an offering he gives to me fresh supply so that I'm equipped to turn around and offer the same sacrifice next time. These are growing opportunities which makes them ways in which God blesses me. Here it is: God doesn't mind blessing me over and over when I don't mind forgiving over and over. That's the grace of God is not it? Tim Hansel in his wonderful provocative work entitled, *You've Got to Keep Dancing*, he says Grace is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off. We need that grace to forgive don't we? But it's not hard for you to forgive because you have Jesus' heart in you.

Tara Storch experienced tragedy when she lost her daughter as a result of a skiing accident in 2010. Storch and her family made the decision to be organ donors and allowed the heart of her precious daughter to be given to a woman who needed a transplant. She made the choice with only one request; she wanted to hear the heartbeat of her daughter beating inside the chest of the transplant recipient after the surgery was done. And so she and her family flew to Phoenix to meet the recipient and when she arrived, per the agreement, she was given a stethoscope to listen to the beating heart inside the chest of this woman who housed her daughter's heart and the question was asked between them when she listened to the healthy rhythm of a beating heart, whose heart did she hear? I don't know how they answered that question, but I'll tell you this, we cannot walk around with stethoscopes pushed into each other's chest checking to see if we are living as heart transplant recipients housing the heart of Jesus inside of each one of us. However, we can watch each other and when we see each other forgiving over and

over again we know that it's because you have in you the heart Jesus. You would have to because when God hears your heart, it's not your heart that he hears. He really hears the heart of his son beating on the inside of your chest. Matter of fact, your ability to forgive is proof that you've had a heart transplant. Do I have a witness?

Good afternoon church. I think this is why David said in Psalm 51 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sins. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Here's the part I like: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

Why is it that you forgive other people? It's because that's exactly what Jesus does for you. Every time you go to him on the course of a given day and say I'm sorry, I know it wasn't but five minutes ago since last we talked, but I need you to look past this just one more time. I don't shout because I got away with it, my shout is over his repetitive forgiveness. And so if god can keep on forgiving me, then I don't have a problem with forgiving you too. Injured, yes, but Ill forgive. Abused, yes, but Ill forgive. Hurt, yes, but ill forgive. Stained, yes, but I'll forgive. Give me a clean heart so I may serve thee. Lord, fix my heart so that I may be used by thee, for I'm not worthy of all your blessings. Give me a clean heart, and I'll follow thee. I'm not asking for the riches of this land, and I'm not asking for men in high places to know my name. Please give me, Lord, a clean heart that I may follow thee. Give me a clean heart, and I'll follow thee.

## **APPENDIX E**

### **SAMPLE OF PRE-IMPOSED QUESTIONS**

### **Sample of Pre-Imposed Questions**

1. Please tell me a little about yourself. (How long have you been a member of St. John's C.M.E. Church? How long have you been a Christian?)
2. What is your familiarity with social justice ministries or local programs? Have you ever been a part of social justice activities either at St. John's or otherwise? Please explain.
3. Since being at St. John's, can you recall any sermons dealing with social justice or community advocacy? What made it memorable?
4. Are you familiar with the life and contributions of John Wesley to the Methodist church? Please explain.

**APPENDIX F**

**SAMPLE OF POST-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS**

### **Sample Post-Reflective Questions**

1. What new insights have you gained about yourself and/or your community after hearing the sermons and discussions?
2. Did the sermons affect your attitude, alter any of your beliefs, behaviors or course of action? (Please explain)
3. As a result of the sermons, do you desire to work with others at St. John's to develop a community advocacy/social justice ministry?
4. If yes to #3, what features or areas of concern interest you most in the development of a social justice ministry?
5. What steps do you think we can take to encourage others to become concerned about social justice ministry at St. John's or in their respective communities?



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